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PICAYUNE PETE; Or, NICODEMUS, THE DOG DETECTIVE.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "PHIL HARDY, THE BOSS BOY," "WILL SOMERS, THE BOY DETECTIVE," ETC.



"THAT'S WHAT I KEER FOR THE PERLICE," SAID PETE. "NICODEMUS, HE KNOWS."

Picayune Pete;

OR,

Nicodemus, the Dog Detective.

BY CHARLES MORRIS,
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CHAPTER I.

A GIRL OVERBOARD.

A BROAD, sunny stream flowing by in a long curve of dimpled waters; on one side the level bottom-lands running back, clad in springtide beauty; on the other a grove of straight, tall trees; a mile to the north the roofs and spires of a city, rising out of emerald verdure—such are the main features of the scene to which we desire to introduce the reader.

On the right of the grove a great boled oak rose from the river-bank, its exposed roots overhanging the waters.

In a nest of these huge roots sat a boy of some fifteen years of age, a ragged, dirty little Arab, but with a shrewd, fearless, independent look that flashed from his bright gray eyes.

He was small for his age, yet graceful, and with a strongly-knit frame, while his face might have been handsome if relieved of its dirt and its present expression of discontent.

He was engaged in the occupation of fishing; a crooked branch, cut from a neighboring willow, serving to sustain his home-made line; while a cork, robbed from some porter-bottle, floated in the focus of his vision. Yet with this primitive tackle he had landed quite a string of fish on the bank, among which curved, snake-like, the body of a large eel.

"Blow them gals!" he grumbled, as a small stone struck the water near his cork; "they'll skeer every scale out of the Maumee; if they don't I'm a monkey. What sich critters was ever got up for gits me. Jist to torment people, I believe."

The soliloquy of this youthful philosopher was cut short by a handful of pebbles that flashed in the water before him.

"Look here now, this is about played!" he cried, sticking his rod angrily among the roots, and springing to his feet.

As he reached the bank he saw a bevy of half a dozen young girls, dressed in holiday attire, who ran laughing from the spot on seeing him.

"You'd better git!" cried the young savage. "I ain't nobody's angel, to stand this sort of thing."

A chorus of laughter answered his angry words. Doubly enraged, he stooped with a quick motion, grasped the eel that lay among his fish, and flung it with a sure aim at the group of his tormentors.

Their tune was changed as the slimy monster hurtled past them, and they ran shrieking to the grove, joining a picnic party that rested and disported under its shade.

"Guess I've settled their bacon," said the boy, his face full of cynical enjoyment of their fright.

"Best git my eel ag'in. That's one thing about gals; they can't stand eel, and snake, and sich like."

Recovering his useful weapon, the youthful woman-hater resumed his fishing, landing the scaly tenants of the river at a rate that would have shamed many a well-appointed fisher, though armed with patented rod and line.

"Seems to me I've settled for them nuisances," he said, as a half-hour passed without interruption. "But I've a notion I hear a steamer comin' downstream. Yes, there's its smoke now," pointing to a fleecy line to the south. "More bother, I s'pose."

In ten minutes more a musical chorus of laughter and merry voices called his attention in the other direction. He perceived four of the girls in a light, canoe-shaped boat, which they were awkwardly paddling, marking every stroke with their merriment.

"Well, I'll be 'tarnally swindled!" he cried, casting down his rod in vexation. "It's a put-up job on me, that's what. And when I came here for a quiet day, too. And, that ain't all. There comes the steamer. It's a chance if it don't rock some of them gals overboard; and I'll be 'specte to jump in and fish them out. But, that ain't my go. No, sir! Cat-ties and pearch are *my* game. Not gals."

His lips closed with an expression of invincible determination as he spoke these words. The boat was now nearly opposite him. One of the girls, a bright-faced, golden-haired little witch, had risen in the bow and was rocking it, to the laughter and affected fright of her companions.

They were so occupied that they failed to perceive the steamboat, bearing down almost directly upon them—the channel here running close to shore.

Nor had the officers of the boat perceived the light craft in their path. The thoughtless children were in imminent danger.

The fisher-boy rose to his feet and sprung to the bank of the stream, with an impulse in contradiction to the cynical selfishness of his talk.

"Ahoy, therel you thundering coal-eater!" he cried in shrill tones. "Do you want to run down the gals? Wake up, blow youl and don't be carrying your eyes in your pockets."

The pilot of the boat caught his words and saw the boat at the same instant, his eyes following the direction of the boy's hand.

A quick shift of the helm and the steamer's head sheered outward. The girls had now become aware of their danger, and were crouched in the bottom of the canoe, with low cries of terror.

The little fairy who had been rocking the boat, however, still stood upright, gazing with parted lips and distended eyes at the approaching peril, either too frightened or too daring to stop.

The next minute the towering steamboat shot swiftly past, not five yards to the left, careening as her passenger's rushed to the side to gaze upon the impaled boat.

Cries of men and screams of women rose from the steamer's deck, as the child in the bow of the boat was hurled headlong into the water, disappearing beneath the billows raised by the wheel.

The boat, with its remaining tenants, glided onward, safely riding the waves.

The engines of the steamer were stopped and reversed as quickly as possible, but she had advanced more than a hundred feet before she could be brought to rest.

Meanwhile the child had risen to the surface, her wide open eyes full of a fearful sense of her danger, and making vague and ill-directed efforts to keep herself from sinking.

A feeling akin to revengeful triumph had arisen in the boy's mind on noticing this disaster to his tormentors. He had been trained in strict Arab discipline, "his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him," and had grown to be a bitter cynic in disposition, impatient and selfish.

Yet, beneath this crust of cynicism lay nobler feelings and a more manly nature.

"S'pose I'll have to go for her," was his next remark, uttered as if her falling overboard was but one of a series of attacks on his personal comfort. "Didn't calkerlate I was goin' gal-fishin'. Bet some catty runs away with my line."

His actions were more decided than his words gave warrant for. Guiltless of coat or shoes, he flung off his hat, and plunged headlong into the stream, swimming toward the struggling girl with as much ease as if this was his native element.

The eyes of all within view were fixed eagerly upon his movements.

"Keep it up, gal," he called out as he approached. "Keep your flippers working. I'll have you in the twinkle of a cat's eye."

This not very polished address failed to have its effect. Still struggling, first the head and then the hands of the child sank out of sight.

With a rapid movement of his lithe body the boy too disappeared beneath the water.

Ten, twenty, thirty seconds, that seemed as many minutes, passed; then a shout arose from the steamer as the head of the girl rose above the waters, followed by that of the boy, who bore her upright in his clasping arms.

The steamer had reversed its motion and was now close upon them, its wheels again at rest.

"Hold her firm there!" cried the captain, from above. "We will have a boat down in a minute."

"You needn't bother yourself," said the boy, defiantly. "You're wide awake enough now, when there ain't no use. I can swim a mile with this feather on my back."

He had placed the child on his back as he spoke, twining her arms round his neck, and started to swim ashore, heedless of the fact that a boat was being lowered.

"Bring them back!" said the captain sternly. "The girl must be half-drowned, and what can this little idiot do in bringing her to?"

This command was literally obeyed. The men in the boat lifted the boy and his charge, despite his struggles, and landed them safely aboard.

He crouched sullenly down in the boat, and remained silent and morose, while the rowers proceeded to pick up the occupants of the canoe.

They then returned to the steamboat, the boy gaining its deck with the agility of a young athlete, while the children were handed up with care.

He was instantly surrounded by a throng of passengers, who manifested a disposition to lionize him, though he responded in sullen monosyllables to all their questions.

Meanwhile the rescued child had been borne to the ladies' cabin, and efforts were being made to restore her suspended animation, which seemed likely to be successful.

The captain now approached the boy.

"What is your name, my lad?" he asked.

"Picayune Pete, the boys call me."

"But what is your last name? Where do your parents live?"

"Don't believe I ever had a last name. Never saw any parents. Live in Toledo."

"Well, I declare!" ejaculated the captain. "This is an odd case. You live somewhere—with some family?"

"You kind of know a good deal about it," said the boy, insolently. "Don't think it's much of anybody's affairs."

"You have acted nobly," said the captain, "in spite of your sourness. We will have to do something for you."

Pete had been looking round with an uneasy, restless gaze. He seemed anxious about something.

Just then a voice near by said:

"The child is all right. She is coming to rapidly."

Something like a smile of pleasure crossed the boy's face. It was quickly replaced by a sour look, as if he was ashamed of any soft emotion.

"Didn't ask nobody to do nothin' for me," he replied to the captain's remark. "Picayune Pete ain't bad at doin' for hisself. Got a bunch of catties and perch ashore there, and calkerlate I'll go for 'em."

Suiting the action to the word, he leaped overboard and struck out lustily for the shore.

The people on the steamer looked after him with various emotions, some laughing, some pitying him as a veritable young savage.

The picnic party had taken the alarm and were hurrying down to his landing-place, eager for information.

But Pete was in no mood for talking or receiving congratulations. Shaking himself, like a water-dog, he seized his fish, and darted rapidly off across the fields.

CHAPTER II.

SCHOOL LIFE.

THERE was commotion in Madame Lucon's Select

School for Young Ladies, at Toledo. A disaster had happened to the annual picnic party, which had always before passed off so creditably.

Some of the under teachers had for the moment relaxed that necessary vigilance where young ladies are in question, and in consequence several of the young ladies had ventured on the river in a boat, and one of them narrowly escaped drowning.

Madame was very indignant at all the participants in this affair. The teachers were made to severely feel their delinquency. The pupils were condemned to listen to a long homily on the virtues of discipline. The three unharmed participants in the boating escapade were made to do penance for their sins. Even the unfortunate heroine of the drowning adventure met with little mercy from the stinging indignation of Madame Lucon.

The child, Minnie Ellis by name, had entirely recovered on the boat, and with dried clothes and uninjured health accompanied her companions back to the school.

The weight of Madame Lucon's indignation fell on all alike, neither pupil nor teacher escaping.

The rescued child was put instantly to bed, for fear of some peril to her health.

She appeared in the hall the next morning, looking so provokingly well, that madame seemed to see in it intentional disrespect to herself.

"I had intended to forbear speaking to you, Miss Ellis," she said, "concerning the unpleasant occurrence of yesterday, until you had recovered from the effects of your imprudence. I am gratified to perceive that it was not as serious as it might have been."

"I am very well, I assure you, Madame Lucon," said Minnie.

"Then, miss, you will please listen attentively to me for a few minutes," said the austere principal. "Are you not aware of the imperative necessity of the young ladies in my school obeying the disciplinary rules?"

"Yes, madame," said Minnie, meekly.

"Yet, great as that fault is, it is venial compared with your acting in a manner unbecoming a young lady. Did you for a moment consider what a responsible duty is imposed on me by the absence of your parent? For you to act in the hoydenish manner of girls who are debarred from the superior advantages appertaining to my school, utterly astounds me. I would not have deemed it possible in any young ladies under my charge."

"We did not think there was any harm in a little boat-ride," said Minnie, demurely.

"I am to think for you," said madame, with a wave of her hand over the assembled class. "You are not expected to know all that appertains to ladylike manners. This is a matter of education, and mine is a most responsible charge, to have the future social position of so many young ladies in my hands."

"But you had not taught us on that point, Madame Lucon," said Minnie, a little defiantly. "We can't become ladies all at once."

"No answer was needed, Miss Ellis," said madame, with redoubled dignity. "And I am surprised at your saying *can't*, where you have been taught to say *cannot*. I hope that is no result of contact with the rude boy who took you from the water. It was too bad that you should expose yourself to be hand'ed by so low a creature."

"Low creature, madame?" said Minnie, quickly, a red spot appearing in her cheek.

"Your tone is much too pronounced, Miss Ellis," said madame, severely.

"He saved my life. And I had been annoying him, too. Excuse me, madame, but I hope you will not speak of him, that way."

"I will see that he is found and rewarded for it. I charge you to think no more of this boy of the gutters, this low creature that calls himself by the barbarous title of Picayune Pete. If you should see him you are not to recognize him."

"I don't care if he does call himself Picayune Pete!" cried Minnie, tears starting to her eyes. "He saved my life, and he is a noble boy, and I can't forget him."

"You forget yourself, Miss Ellis," said the dignified principal. "Your tears and your tone are alike disrespectful. And you have used the word *can't* again, after my remarks about the use of such words. For this I give you one page of dictionary to learn. You can leave the room now, Miss Ellis."

Minnie Ellis needed no second command.

She was a veritable little beauty as she flashed into her own class-room, with her bright blue eyes, her clear skin, rosy-cheeks, and golden curls.

Minnie lived in the city, being only a day scholar at Madame Lucon's Select School.

This gave her an opportunity of finding and thanking her rescuer which she would not otherwise have had—the boarders at the Young Ladies' Seminary having very little liberty.

Yet she seemed destined to be unsuccessful in her search. For more than a week she had persevered without success.

She found, it is true, some persons who knew Picayune Pete. But the reports of these persons were very discouraging in character.

Her desire to find him was only augmented by these reports, the missionary spirit being roused in her. She hoped and prayed to herself that she might be able to persuade the boy from his bad habits.

It was during the afternoon of a Saturday when the weekly holiday freed her from school, and her aunt's permission started her on an expedition to the woods in search of Mayflowers, that she at length came upon the object of her quest.

He was stretched flat on his back on a green woodland knoll, playing with a little cur of a dog as unpolished and independent-looking as himself.

"I have been so wanting to see you," she cried, running up to him with a burst of childish confidence, "and to thank you again and again for saving me from drowning."

Pete honored this impulsive speech by rising on one elbow, while the cur sat on his haunches and looked her doubtfully in the face.

"You've been wantin' that, hey?" he asked.

"You know you were ever so kind," she said, "and I could not be easy till I thanked you."

"Oh, you couldn't be easy," said Pete, sarcastically, "and it's jist three weeks yesterday. You must been as uneasy as all blazes."

"But I could not find you," she continued, bending over him in her eagerness. "I asked the boys everywhere, and no one could tell me where to find you!"

"Oh! you axed the boys?" said Pete, with redoubled sarcasm; "and you told that gutter-snipe, Billy Devine, that you was a rich gal, and you was a-goin' to pay me for jerkin' you out of the Maumee."

"I am not rich," she replied, with a shade of disappointment in her tone; "and I did not tell him so. But Madame Lucon will see that you are rewarded."

"Who is she?" asked Pete.

"She's our teacher, you know. She keeps the Select School for Young Ladies, where I go to school."

Minnie's tone was slightly satirical.

"Oh, that's what she is, hey? Well, jist tell your teacher with the High Dutch name that Picayune Pete ain't on the make. When I pulls catties out of the water I'll take tin for 'em. But when I fish out gals they ain't fur sale. How's that, Nicodemus?"

The dog gave a sharp bark that made Minnie start back in dismay.

"Bless you, gal, don't git skeered. Nicodemus wouldn't hurt you fur a bushel of peanuts. He's been brung up pious and respectable, and he knows when he's in good company."

"Where did you ever get such a name for a dog?"

"I dunno. Picked it up one Sunday they wormed me into Sunday-school. Never got sold that way but once, you bet!"

"Oh, Pete!" cried the horrified child. "You do not know how good a place Sunday-school is, I am sure, or you would not talk so. You should go. Indeed you should."

"In this rig?" asked Pete, looking down disdainfully at his ragged suit.

"But those are not your Sunday clothes?" she asked, doubtfully.

"They ain't, hey? I'd like to know where t'other ones are!" said Pete.

He had now risen, with a growing sense of politeness, and was leaning lazily against a tree.

"But will not your father or mother find you better clothes than those?" she asked.

"Never had no father nor mother, as I knows on," said Pete; "and old Meg, as I live with, would see me blowed fu'st."

"Oh, dear, that's too bad!" said Minnie, in startled pity. "No one to care for you. And always living among bad people, and learning nothing good. I am sorry for you."

"What fur, I'd like to know?" asked Pete, sturdily. "I'd like to see the feller that's got a better time than Picayune Pete—'cept it's Nicodemus."

"But you never went to school; and you do talk so queer, Madame Lucon would be horrified. I suppose you cannot even read and write."

"Old High Dutch wouldn't like my kind of talk?" asked Pete.

"No," said Minnie. "And then you like such a life. You don't work any. And you don't study. And you don't even care to keep your hands and face clean. I do so wish you would try and do better and be better. I know you have a good heart, and I like you, and I hope you will try and be a better boy."

"What's your name, gal?" asked Pete.

"Minnie Ellis."

"Mine's Picayune Pete. I ain't been brung up like you have, gal. I've been kicked up. You're a nice little gal, you are, and I ain't got nothin' ag'in' you, but you can't come the camp-meeting game on me. I kin outroll, outride, outdive, outswim, outclimb, and outtumble all Ohio, and a slice of Indiana to boot, an' I ain't sellin' out to the little gal, you bet. Come, Nicodemus."

Whistling defiantly Pete walked away deeper into the woods. The dog greeted Minnie with one reproachful look, and then followed his master.

She stood stupefied with surprise at the result of her missionary effort. The thought had lurked somewhere, deep within her mind, that if she could but find Pete she might be enabled to make a good boy of him.

The signal failure of her attempt pained and discouraged her.

Minnie walked home much debating with herself, yet determined not to give up her effort to aid Pete, and to try and make a better boy of him.

Meanwhile Pete went surlily homeward, angry with himself, and angry with his new acquaintance.

He felt that he had acted very rudely. She had only asked to thank him and expressed interest in him. He had behaved worse than his dog would have done to the petting hand of a stranger. But then, she had aggravated him. She was a gal, anyhow, and he wanted nothing to do with gals.

So ran the current of thought in Pete's mind. The strange point in it was that his ordinary manner now struck him as rudeness. Minnie Ellis had certainly interested him.

On entering the city he perceived two persons in the street before him. They were busily conversing and did not notice his approach.

He honored them with as little notice, and was just behind them, walking at a speed that would soon take him past them, when he was struck by

hearing one of them pronounce the name then most prominent in his mind—"Minnie Ellis."

A slight exclamation, masked by an affected cough, evinced his surprise.

One of the men looked sharply round. Pete caught a glimpse of a face known to him, a face with a sinister history in his mind.

The boy passed on with affected indifference, making a partial effort to catch the other face; but it was turned away from him.

The men suppressed their conversation, while he was within hearing, a fact significant to his mind, trained as he had been in suspicion.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT WAS "IN THE WIND?"

MINNIE ELLIS had not seen her father, since she was five years of age. He had been at one time a prosperous merchant, but he had failed in business through circumstances beyond his control.

He had been greatly depressed by his misfortune, and there was soon added to it a greater; his wife suddenly sickened and died.

Mr. Ellis was terribly cast down by this second trouble. He could not endure the scenes which constantly reminded him of former happiness and present misery.

California had then become the goal of men seeking a quick return of fortune, and also of those seeking relief from sorrow in excitement.

To this golden country his steps were turned. But the journey across the plains which he resolved to take, was not fit for a delicate child of five years. Minnie was therefore left behind, in the care of a married sister of her father.

During the interval which had elapsed between that period and the opening of our story he had not deemed it advisable to send for his daughter, though she received frequent affectionate letters from him.

His mining adventures had not prospered. He was no richer to-day than on the day in which he had left Toledo. Besides, the rudeness of the mining-camp rendered it no place for his daughter.

In the mind of the saddened man, striving year after year to win fortune from the rocks, this daughter was growing to be an angel of beauty and love; and he looked forward longingly to the day when the long-sought wealth should come to him, and he could be again united to his child in some scene more attractive than the rude mining-village.

Minnie's aunt received from him sufficient money for the child's living and school expenses, and treated her with as much kindness as her nature permitted. She was a bustling, energetic housewife, and much of the milk of human kindness had soured in her over the kitchen fire, or had dried up under the strain of the broomstick and scrubbing-brush.

Severe as Madame Lucon was, Minnie preferred her school life, and the society of her school companions, to her home life.

Her aunt had a son, now a man of twenty-two, who had been a thorn in the flesh of her in her earlier years, but who had now been for some years absent from home.

He was a sleek, specious, well-spoken boy, yet with a grain of innate selfishness and petty tyranny that had given much torment to the sensitive child who was brought up as his companion.

She had not seen him for more than two years, he being engaged in some position in the city of New Orleans.

He had suddenly returned home just before the opening of our story. He proved now a well-dressed and well-behaved young man, and seemed by his display of attention to Minnie anxious to remove the bad impression he had left behind him.

One morning several days after her interview with Pete, the child was surprised by an unusual display of affection on the part of her aunt.

This busy lady had usually dismissed her to school very curtly, but this morning she was kindness itself.

"Be sure, Minnie, and come home as soon as school is out," she said; "I am uneasy whenever you are late home from school."

"But Madame Lucon keeps me in, sometimes," said Minnie. "She gives me such long tasks, and I cannot learn them."

"I must really speak to her," said the aunt. "I fear she is overworking you. There, my dear, it is time you were going."

She stooped and kissed the child, dismissing her with an affectionate touch on the head.

Minnie walked to school in a half-dazed condition. "My dear," from her aunt! What was going to happen!

And as for a kiss she could hardly remember ever being kissed by her before.

"This is all too good to last," she said to herself. "Madame will be doubly sour to make up for aunty's sweetness. I believe the old thing has a spite against me, anyhow."

But the "old thing" was marvelously sweet this morning.

"Have you your task ready, Miss Ellis?" she asked in a tone so unlike her ordinary one that Minnie was at a loss to understand it.

"I tried hard, madame; indeed I did," said Minnie in a pleading voice, "but I am afraid I have forgotten some of it."

"Did you find it so difficult?"

"Yes, madame, I studied all evening," said the child, in utter surprise at this unusual questioning.

"Well, well, perhaps I did not consider your powers sufficiently. I have long observed that you did your best, Minnie, and I may have been over-tasking you. I will make your lessons lighter in future."

"Oh, thank you, madame! You are very kind, indeed!" cried Minnie. "I get such headaches, and then I can't study at all."

"Can't, Minnie?" said madame, lifting her finger with what seemed a gesture of playful reproof.

"Oh, madame!" exclaimed Minnie, fearing that she had turned the tide of her good fortune. "It is too bad. I try to stop using that word, and I keep saying it in spite of all."

"Cannot is more correct English," said madame, kindly. "It is my aim to make you all polished speakers of your native tongue. I am sure you will not offend again."

"No, indeed, not if I can help it," said Minnie, sincerely.

The child passed on into the school more dazed than before. Were the heavens dropping manna into her empty cup?

Madame Lucon's kindness lasted the day through, and for several successive days.

Minnie seemed walking in a dream all these days. She could not see the cause of this sudden change, and was too young to trouble herself much about logical reasons.

Her cousin was very attentive to her. He seemed to have no idea of engaging in any business, at least as long as he had any money in his pocket; and spent his time in the indefinite employment of lounging.

His attention to Minnie extended to occasionally accompanying her to school, or meeting her on the way home.

Minnie would chat with him with childish vulnerability, and quite failed to perceive a fact which escaped not his observant eyes. This was that she was constantly followed, in her comings and goings, by a ragged-looking boy, who was in his turn followed by as ragged and disreputable a dog.

Not that he appeared to be troubled about the child. He would be lounging here, or hurrying forward there, now selling papers and now carrying a package; but he was always in sight when she was on the street, and always kept her in sight until she

vanished behind the doors of the school or of her home.

This seeming persistence of the boy could not wholly be the effect of accident. There seemed to be too much method in it for that, and Minnie's cousin lost himself in conjectures of the lad's object.

Yet, instead of speaking directly to the boy he broached the subject to his mother.

"There he is now, mother," he said, after telling her what he had observed. "I think it might be best for you to speak to the young vagabond. If I attempted it I might do him an injury."

"I don't see that there would be any occasion for that, William," she replied.

"I know the boy is impudent," he said, "and I am of a hasty temper. He might aggravate me too much."

"You should control your temper," she answered. "No matter, I will speak to him. Minnie's safety is a matter of importance to us now, William. My brother, you know, is delicate, and may not live long."

A meaning smile passed between mother and son, as the latter turned away and passed into the house.

The boy stood erect against the corner of an opposite house, watching the ceremony of unloading a wagon at a grocer's store near by.

He was a short, sturdy, smooth-faced fellow, the bare skin showing through rents in his uncanny clothes, while a shock of brown hair stood up like a plume through a hole in the top of his cap. His bare feet mocked at respectability.

He crossed the street readily at her imperative call, whistling up his dog, who seemed doubtful about venturing into such austere company.

"What is your name, boy?" asked Mrs. Denton, in her sternest tones.

The lad leaned lazily against a lamp-post, and took a deliberate survey of the lady from head to foot, before answering:

"It's Peter, when folks want to be perlite, and it's Pete, when they're in a hurry," was his answer.

"And what do you want here?"

"Jist to see what you're a-callin' me for. Nothing else, I reckon."

"And is that why you have been hanging round this house for three or four days? I would like to know what a ragged young rascal like you wants in this respectable neighborhood?"

"Had a notion maybe you'd gi'n me a job."

"You are watching an opportunity to steal," said the irate lady. "I will give you into the hands of the police if you continue to infest this neighborhood!"

"The perlite? Nicodemus, are you a-listenin'?" asked Pete of his dog.

The cur responded with a disdainful bark.

"Stand on your head, Nick, and wag your tail," commanded Pete.

The well-trained dog performed this difficult operation with apparent ease.

"That's what I keer for the perlite," said Pete. "Nicodemus, he knows."

"Ask about Minnie," whispered William Denton, peeping out from a door behind his mother. He had evidently been listening to this conversation.

"That is not all," said the austere lady. "You have been seen to follow my niece, Minnie Ellis, to and from school. Tell me, sirrah, what your designs are, or I shall certainly have you arrested."

"Sometimes fellers have got to keep mum," was Pete's aggravating answer. "Howsomever, if you won't tell anybody, I don't mind posting you." He lowered his voice to a confidential tone as he continued. "Fact is, ma'am, the little gal and me has about agreed to hitch hosses. She's goin' to run away with me. A reg'lar 'lopement, now I tell you. None of your locomotive, half-cut runaways, but an out-and-out stunner. Don't you blow, ma'am."

"Why, you insolent young rascal, how dare you? What do you mean?" cried the exasperated lady, advancing a step toward the imperturbable boy.

Pete laughed, defiantly.

"Got the kerridge ready, ma'am. It's to be a reg'lar old-time blow-out, you bet. Two black nags and a darky driver, and Nicodemus under the hosses."

The dog, as usual, barked on hearing his name mentioned.

"If you don't see this little gal home to supper to-night, you kin know what's up. Good-by, ma'am. Don't git nervous."

Pete whistled for Nicodemus, and started away.

Mrs. Denton remained too exasperated for speech, shaking her hands menacingly at the boy.

But her son ran hastily out of the open door.

"Hold there, you vagrant," he cried, in a passion. "I have seen you following my cousin. I am going to be on the watch to-night, and if you dare follow her again I will break every bone in your body."

"You will, hey?" said Pete, boldly.

"Yes, and send you to the lock-up into the bargain. I will see if young girls can't come home from school without being dogged by vagabonds. There is something up between you and some of the Toledo rascals. But you have got the wrong man to deal with if you stir me up."

"Ain't you a bit too windy, young man?" asked the undaunted boy.

The angry man made a rush at his antagonist. But Nicodemus sprung between them with an angry bark, and showed his teeth in a menacing way.

"Best hold your hosses when Nicodemus is about," said Pete. "He don't allow no foolin'. Hope you said good-by to the little gal this mornin', for her and me is goin' to be spliced, sure."

He walked away again with a most aggravating gait.

That evening, sure enough, Minnie failed to return from school at the usual time. But such delay was nothing uncommon with her, and her aunt hardly noticed her absence, until the supper hour had arrived and she had not yet appeared.

She began to grow nervous, however, as supper-time passed and Minnie was still absent.

Her son William now came in, and manifested like uneasiness on knowing of this continued absence.

He had not had a chance of meeting her on her way home from school, as he had been doing during the few days past. He immediately started out in search of her. It was two hours before he returned, having been unsuccessful.

Mrs. Denton, now seriously alarmed, hastened to the school, and to the different houses at which the child had been in the habit of visiting.

No trace of her was forthcoming. One of the pupils had left her at a short distance from the school, declining Minnie's invitation to visit a piece of woodland, beyond the city limits, to gather flowers.

Madame Lucon shared her visitor's excitement on hearing of the child's strange absence.

It was now past eight o'clock, the night was cloudy, and it had grown quite dark. The alarm spread through the town, and numbers of the citizens joined in the search.

Evening deepened into night, the hours rolled on; yet the child continued missing.

The most alarming apprehensions began to be entertained. Some supposed that she had been drowned, remembering her former escape. Others talked of murder. Every contingency was debated. The search was extended far beyond the city limits with torches and lanterns.

Madame Lucon now spoke out:

"I have just been informed," she said, "that Mr. Ellis has been lately very fortunate in his gold-mining, and is now possessed of great wealth. Some villain might have heard of this, and have stolen the child, to exact money from the father."

"She has been followed by a ragged boy, calling himself Pete," said Mrs. Denton. "He threatened me that she would be stolen this very afternoon. He must be arrested at once."

The secret of the aunt's and madame's new kind-

ness was out. They had heard of the good fortune of Mr. Ellis, but their sudden affection seemed likely to be of little benefit to Minnie.

The night passed. A new day dawned. But a gloom rested upon the city, for the child was still missing.

CHAPTER IV.

PETE AS A "LION."

THE excitement in Toledo was redoubled as the succeeding day advanced and no trace of the child was found. The town had been pretty thoroughly searched, the police entering every house which they had any reason to suspect. But the search was in vain.

Several of the richer inhabitants of the place combined to offer a reward, and before night the walls were placarded with handbills offering five thousand dollars reward for the recovery of Minnie Ellis and the capture of the child-stealers.

Such an offer was well calculated to set all the people astir, with double assiduity, in search of the missing child.

Mrs. Denton had already made public her suspicions of the boy calling himself Pete. His name was all she could tell about him, with an indefinite description of his appearance.

The night passed, and another day dawned on the unquiet city.

Mrs. Denton was eagerly detailing to a circle of sympathizing neighbors the story she had told twenty times already, of the threats of the ragged vagrant, and of her mental certainty that he had stolen her niece, when, to her utter astonishment, the identical individual walked up to the group.

His hands were sunk in his pockets, his cap set rakishly on the back of his head, while Nicodemus, as usual, followed close to his heels.

"Heered you was lookin' for me, ma'am," he said, "and thought I'd step up and report."

Mrs. Denton flung up her hands in excitement.

"That is him!" she cried. "That is the young rascal! He threatened to steal Minnie! Run for a policeman, somebody! He must be arrested!"

"There ain't no sort of hurry, ma'am," said Pete, coolly. "I ain't got no notion of runnin' away. Wouldn't 'a' come here if I'd been afeerd. Me and Nicodemus ain't on the run."

A half-grown girl had hastily left the circle on the first demand for an officer, and now appeared, bringing one of these important public functionaries.

"So it is this young wharf-rat?" said the officer, on seeing Pete. "I always thought there was something wrong about this one. Come along, my youthful offender. Who is going to appear against him?"

"I am," said Mrs. Denton, eagerly. "And my son, also. We both heard his threats. He said—"

"That will do, ma'am," replied the officer, curtly. "Tell the squire what he said. There is no use telling me. Come, my cove, you are wanted."

He laid his hand heavily on Pete's shoulder. Nicodemus growled ominously, and showed his teeth.

"Best take your paw off. Johnny, if you don't want a veal cutlet took out of your calf," said Pete. "Nick ain't pertickler, when he's woke up, whether it's 'possum or perlice. I'm a-goin' with you; so don't fuss."

The officer seemed himself to think that the dog was in earnest, and hastily removed his hand.

"Come ahead, then," he said. "And I want all the witnesses at Squire Harvey's office below there."

He had all the witnesses, and half the town, it seemed, judging by the throng that crowded into the office behind him and the prisoner.

The squire, a middle-aged, half-bald man, with round, consequential face, and wearing glasses, looked up expectantly at the crowd.

After the fashion of magistrates everywhere, fines and dues were the breath of life to him, and he hailed every new case as so much grist to his mill.

"Who have you here, officer?"

"A boy suspected of having something to do with the abduction of Minnie Ellis," said the policeman.

"Ha!" cried the squire, pushing up his spectacles excitedly. "You don't tell me that? Who is he?" he asked.

"He is a boy who threatened to run away with my niece," cried Mrs. Denton. "He talked to me in the most tantalizing way. And he said—"

"There, there, there! That will do," exclaimed the squire. "Wait till I ask for your evidence. Is this woman one of the witnesses, officer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well. We will hear what she has to say. Bring the boy in here."

Pete, who had been mute as a mouse since being brought into the office, was conducted to a contracted space behind the magistrate's desk. He stood quietly enough here, listening with an amused expression to Mrs. Denton's testimony.

The good lady repeated, what Peter had said about her niece, adding to it, however, with a dozen inferences, suggestions and conjectures.

William Denton's testimony was to the same effect. He also described how Pete had followed Minnie to and from school, and the suspicions which had been roused in his mind.

At the conclusion of his evidence there was plainly a strong feeling against Pete.

There was no other witness, except that some persons present volunteered their opinion of the vagrant character of the prisoner.

Pete sat imperturbably through it all, not speaking or moving.

After the squire had finished taking his notes of the evidence, and adjusting his spectacles at a severe angle, he called out:

"Has the defense any witnesses?"

There was no answer to this appeal, save a murmur in the audience.

"Bring the boy up, officer; I will question him," continued the squire.

Pete was accordingly brought before the stern tribunal of local justice. He did not seem particularly awed by the squire's dignity, however, but stood before him in an easy and careless attitude.

"What is your name?" asked the squire, looking over his spectacles at the boy.

"Pete."

"Pete? That's only half a name. Pete what?"

"Never had no second story on my name," said Pete.

"Don't you know your father's name?"

"Dunno if I ever had any," replied Pete. "If I had, he emigrated afore I knowed anything. All the extra name I got is what the boys givin' me."

"What is that?"

"Picayune Pete, they call me."

A stir went through the throng at these words, accompanied by a loud murmur.

"Silence there," cried the squire, severely. "What is the matter?"

"Why, squire," cried one of the auditors, "this is the very boy who saved Minnie Ellis the other week, when she fell into the river. This is all the thanks he gets for it, to be arrested for stealing her. It is a blasted shame."

"Is that the fact, boy?" asked the justice. "Did you save the child's life?"

"I jumped into the Maumee, that's sart'in, and grabbed the little girl. Didn't quite like to see her go to the fishes."

Pete was the most unconcerned person present.

An excitement possessed the throng on finding that the child's rescuer stood accused of being concerned in her loss.

Mrs. Denton, with a revulsion of feeling, pressed up beside him.

"I withdraw the charge," she cried. "I was hard on the boy, and that is why he was so impudent to me, I suppose."

The good lady had quick and tender feelings

when they were once touched through her crust of everyday hardness.

"Very well, ma'am," answered the squire, impatiently. "I will never get through this case if there are to be so many interruptions. Where do you live, boy?"

"Down in Gray's Court, with Old Meg."

"What do you do for a living?"

"A little of everything. I carry bundles, hold hosses, black boots, sell papers, go a-fishin', play circens, 'tend store, polish lampposts—"

"Hold there!" cried the squire; "that will do. How came you to tell this lady that her niece was to be stolen?"

"She aggravated me 'bout the gal, and I wanted to worry her; that's all. Dunno a cent's wu'th about it."

"How came you to follow her in the street, then, as this other witness testified?"

"He's a galoot, 'squire, that's what he is," said Pete. "Me spend my time follering a gal! I like a joke, but that's a bit too good. I'm kind of everywhere, every day, and he sees double sometimes, I reckon. Got too much bizness of my own on hand to foller gals."

"I see nothing against the lad," said the 'squire to the audience. "His saving the child's life is proof that he had nothing to do with her loss. What will you do, Pete, if I discharge you? I don't like to hear of you leading the life of a vagrant."

"I ain't no vagrant," said Pete. "I've got a home for my nights, and plenty of work for daytime."

"What kind of work?"

"I'm goin' for that gal, and the five thousand to boot; if I ain't, I'll sell out. Bound to bring her, too. Brung her once afore, and guess I can do it ag'in."

A laugh ran through the crowd as they filed out of the office, followed by Pete, who was the lion of the hour. Nicodemus was waiting with a warm welcome for him, as he passed, a free boy, into the street again.

The 'squire beckoned slyly to the officer.

"Keep an eye on that boy," he said. "The young rogue knows more than he will tell."

CHAPTER V. PETE IS "POSED."

PETE went to work without delay, as he had promised. He had a double incentive in seeking Minnie Ellis. First, the interest which he had taken in the child, despite his assumed rudeness. Second, the hope to gain the reward offered.

The magnitude of this reward was so great, in Pete's fancy, that it seemed a princely fortune to him. Five dollars was the highest spoke in the wheel of fortune to which his hopes had hitherto borne him.

It must be confessed that Pete had very little information to begin operations upon. He had heard the name "Minnie Ellis" pronounced in the street. This was the whole and sole fact that he had to work on, and yet he was fully satisfied in his mind that it would lead him to a solution of the mystery.

He had this much warrant for his belief. The man who had spoken the name bore no creditable character, and his suspicious glance, and silence until Pete had passed, were indications of a mystery.

The boy was shrewd enough to keep all this to himself during his examination before the squire. Long experience had taught him the virtues of discretion and a still tongue.

The man he had recognized was a well-known character in Toledo; in fact, much better known than respected.

He called himself Colonel Green, though no one knew how he obtained his military title. As for business, he had none visible to the community at large. He gave out that he was a gentleman of means. In that case his income must have been very uncertain, for at times he grew utterly shabby

and threadbare, and would shortly emerge on society in butterfly grandeur of dress.

It was shrewdly whispered that his income came from the gaming-table.

Whispered, not spoken, for Colonel Green was something of a bully, and it was dangerous to hint at his lack of respectability.

Pete in his perambulations had often met him, though it is doubtful if the colonel had eyes for the vagrant who so intently regarded him.

It worried our young detective that he had failed to recognize the companion of the colonel on the occasion referred to. It would have lightened his prospective labors to have a double trail to follow.

He must put himself on the track of Colonel Green, and see what would come of it.

"An' I've got to be as sly as an old 'coon bout it," soliloquized Pete. "The colonel's a hoss that's up to chaff. Got to watch him like an old crow watches a gunner. Guess, though, I've been there. Bet I sell out the kurnel. Picayune Pete's a pony hisself—if he ain't I'll cave."

But it proved not so easy to get on the track of Colonel Green. Pete was pretty well acquainted with all his lounging places, but he failed to make his appearance at any of them. He found out where the colonel lived, and sought him there. Here, too, he was astray. The object of his search had been absent from homo for a week.

This lack of success was rather encouraging to Pete than the reverse. There must be some good reason for the colonel's suddenly absenting himself, and Pete argued that the loss of Minnie Ellis was that reason.

The boy had something of the instinct of the bloodhound; he was not to be deterred because the scent was cold.

Several days passed, during which Pete kept up this quiet but unsuccessful search for the colonel.

Meanwhile the excitement in the city was growing in intensity as time passed and no trace of the child was found. The gravest doubts were entertained, and the whole community was shaken to its center with anger and fear.

Not only in Toledo, but in the country around, and in all the towns and cities within a circuit of a hundred miles, were the people and the officials on the alert.

But the hours and days were passing, and no discovery had been made—no trace of the lost child found.

This excitement resulted in a public meeting, called by some of the wealthiest citizens to inaugurate still more decided measures, and if deemed advisable, to increase the reward.

The city hall was crowded, and a number of eloquent speeches made on the subject, in which the measures which had been taken were fully described.

The set speeches over, the meeting became more chatty.

"The poor little creature's been drowned," cried one individual. "I move that we drag the river, and if that won't do, drag the lake."

"Hadn't we best drag the ocean, and be done with it?" asked a sarcastic person in the audience.

"It seems to me that there has been a radical defect in the mode of offering the reward," said another.

"If the gentleman has any suggestions to offer we will be glad to entertain them," remarked the chairman of the meeting.

The person speaking rose in his seat and fronted the chairman.

"The reward is offered for the recovery of the child and arrest of her abductor," he said. "This I think, is an error. He will certainly take good care that he is not found or the child either. But if the reward was offered for the child alone the child-stealer himself might be induced to return her, for the sake of the money. Or some party not willing to betray him might be tempted to return the child."

"I think that a very good idea," said another member of the meeting, "except that it would remove all inducement to seek for the abductor himself. I fancy our friend does not desire such a consummation as that. My view is that a double reward should be offered, a fixed amount for the child, and an equal sum for her stealer."

"The gentleman speaks," broke in another, "as if the reward was the only inducement to this search. So far as I am concerned, I would be sorry to admit that it is any inducement at all. I have a family. I have children whom I love. Their safety is the strongest inducement to me. Fellow-citizens, shall we offer a premium to crime, by taking the very action for which this villain may be waiting? He may return the child for the sake of the reward. But to-morrow he may steal another of our children; perhaps mine; perhaps yours. Is it our aim to produce this result, gentlemen? I admit that I fully sympathize with the friends of this poor child. But we have a higher duty to perform, a duty to the community at large, to which all individual claims must yield. Fellow-citizens, it may be the sole object of this vile child-stealer to obtain the reward. Shall we give him the opportunity he craves by offering a reward for the child alone? No! A thousand times no! We must pursue him relentlessly; with the hand of the avenger, not that of the rewarder, and desist not until all his schemes are overthrown, all his villainy foiled, and himself hunted to earth as we would hunt a wildcat or a panther."

A loud burst of applause followed this energetic appeal.

After the noise had somewhat subsided, a person near the door, and who had lately entered, addressed the meeting.

"I quite agree with the last speaker," he said, in a courteous tone. "Every effort must be made to arrest the perpetrator of this outrage, and no attempt to play into his hands be for a moment permitted. In my view of the case all has not been done that might be done, and I am here to-day to make that I consider an important proposition. Photographs of Minnie Ellis have been placed in the hand of the police, but the public at large have only vague descriptions to go by. I move that the portrait of Minnie Ellis be given to the public, by means of the illustrated papers and otherwise. It may prove a very efficient aid in her recovery."

"I second that motion," cried a person near him.

"You have all heard the motion of Colonel Green," said the chairman. "Is the meeting prepared for the question?"

Some debate followed, mostly favorable to the proposition, after which the motion was put and unanimously carried.

At the name of Colonel Green the face of one of the crowd of boys who surrounded the open door peered curiously in, with a most perplexed expression.

"If it ain't him I'm a catty," was the boy's mental soliloquy. "But, how in blazes he got in without me twigging him, beats pigeon's eggs. And him a-making speeches 'bout the gal, and wantin' photographs and all that! Well, I'll sell my old hat for a puddin'-bag; if I don't, skin me! It's jist the cleanest sell I ever run across. Don't quite swaller it all, kurnel. I reckon I'll go for you, if you are a speechifying at the meetin'."

Pete was as good as his word. When the meeting broke up, and Colonel Green returned with the throng to the street, there was a human sleuth-hound on his track, whom he would not find it easy to evade.

CHAPTER VI.

PETE GOES A-FISHING AND HOLES A SHARE.

It proved no light task which Pete had set himself. Colonel Green's first movement was to his home in the city. This was a half-hotel, half-boarding-house,

in which it was evident that Minnie Ellis could not be concealed.

His next move was to a tavern which he was much in the habit of frequenting, a drinking establishment of no great odor of respectability in the city.

From this he proceeded to a mansion of more mysterious purpose, but of whose uses the ubiquitous boy was well aware.

It was a gambling establishment in which the secrets of faro, poker, and roulette, were nightly taught to all who were willing to pay for their knowledge.

"Working for the dead hoss to-day," was Pete's growling comment. "Dunno what to make of the chap, anyhow. Looks as if he'd nothing in hand but eatin', drinkin', and gamblin', 'cept it's making speeches. He lets hisself out some at speechifying, but I've a notion it was all playing 'possum. Got anything to say on that subject, Nicodemus?"

The dog answered by a series of discordant barks.

"Jist so, Nick. Jist what I think, too. You're a clear-headed dorg; if you ain't, I'll cave."

This day was a copy of the two or three succeeding. Pete's business affairs were sadly neglected. He had nobler work on hand, and stumbled into Colonel Green's way with a persistence that must have attracted that person's attention, only for the boy's shrewd mode of conducting the investigation.

The associates of the colonel were also objects of great interest to him. Not one of the more familiar of these but that Pete honored with a share of his special attention.

But among them he saw no one reminding him of the person with whom he had heard Colonel Green speak of Minnie Ellis.

One day he thought he had a glimpse of this individual, passing the colonel in the street with a seeming gesture of recognition. But, as before, he saw only his back, and soon lost sight of that.

All this was very discouraging to the boy. There was nothing to show that Colonel Green had any deeper interest at stake than the needs of eating and sleeping at his boarding-house, of imbibing at the tavern, or of gambling at the saloons.

His few days' absence might have been on an innocent business call. He had certainly spoken strongly in favor of energetic action, at the meeting, and the people looked on him as one favoring and counseling the most inflexible pursuit of the abductor.

But Pete was cross-grained, and did not readily take to new views.

"All sound, kurnel," he said to himself, "but I'm not sellin' out at half price. You're sailin' smooth these days, that I'll gi'n in; but I've a notion there's rough water ahead. Can't get over that 'Minnie Ellis.' That sticks half-way down, kurnel. Ain't easy swallowed. Reckon I'll gi'n you my valerale attention a day or two longer."

A day or two more passed and then there was an explosion.

Old Meg—a cross, sour, profane, dried-up house-keeper—gave Pete a very considerable slice of her mind.

"I ain't keepin' a boardin'-house for the likes of you, you young imp," was her mild remark. "You hav'n't brought the valley of a cent into the house these two weeks. Do you think, maybe, I'm goin' to fret my life and soul out, and scrub my hands out for such a dirty vagabond as you? I'll give you a taste of the broomstick that you'll not forget soon if— And what are you at now, for all the world?"

"Goin' a-fishin', Meg. Want to shet up your mouth with a big catty."

"You best be lookin' for a job and trying to 'arn a decent livin', instead of wastin' your time over cattles. And you'll not bring a scale home, I know it."

"Catties don't have no scales, Meg," cried Pete, laughing, as he made his way out of hearing of her eloquent remarks.

Pete's fishing-place that day lay down the river, several miles from the place where the reader has already seen him making havoc among the fish.

He had his usual good luck, and soon landed a respectable string of fish.

He had just strung these on a pliable twig, and deposited them in a pool of water, for the purpose of keeping them in condition, when his attention was drawn to the figure of a man passing through the woods that bordered this part of the river.

He was some distance away, and half-hidden by the trees, but there was something very familiar to Pete in the gray, cut-away coat, and the general figure and gait of the man.

With the utmost haste the boy disposed of his fishing-tackle in a safe place, and started rapidly on the track of the person he had seen.

He soon brought him within view again, and followed more cautiously, taking care to keep the tree-trunks between himself and the man in advance.

"Don't think you'd recognize me, kurnel," he said to himself, "and calculate I won't push myself on you. Mought be awkward, you know. Got my left eye on you, kurnel. When I take aim with the left eye it never misses. Think I'll jist take a quiet walk through the woods. Hope you ain't got no objections, kurnel. You and me ain't never been interduced, or I mought jine you."

The wood soon ended in an open, farming country. The colonel here took a narrow lane, which led him through a range of farms, and into another piece of woodland, some two miles forward.

Pete had plodded along in the rear, managing to avoid the suspicious glances which the colonel cast back, or to appear as a rustic farm-hand, without a thought above turnips.

On leaving this strip of woodland Colonel Green emerged upon the bank of the river, at a wild-looking place.

It was a small clearing, which had been abandoned, while a thick growth of bushes had replaced the felled trees, some of whose trunks were yet visible in the long grass.

The line of woods stretched around it and touched the river-bank beyond.

Near the river lay the deserted cabin of the settler, a two-story log-hut. The upper story seemed to have been added more recently, and was built of roughly-planed boards.

Pete hung back in the shadow of a huge oak while the colonel walked rapidly across the intervening space and disappeared within the door of the hut.

"Treed, Kurnel Green; if you ain't, Picayune Pete don't know beans. You've got the gal in that shanty, and I'm jist the feiler to bring her out of there, or blow up. Look out, kurnel, Pete's a-coming."

The low bushes surrounding the hut fully protected Pete's advance. He crept forward with the utmost caution, avoiding any noise, and was some twenty minutes in reaching the hut.

He had approached it from the rear. The old, moss-grown and decayed logs rose upright before him, partly covered by climbing vines.

There was no opening in the lower story, but a small window appeared in the side of the upper story just above him.

The river ran here close by him, with a small sail-boat tied to the bank. The place seemed to have been used as a sort of fishing-station.

Without further hesitation Pete grasped the vines and the projections of the logs, and began cautiously to ascend.

It was child's play to him, and in a minute or two he had grasped the sill of the window, and swung himself so that his eyes commanded a view of the interior.

A small room was visible before him, an open door leading into a passage beyond, while a second closed door seemed to lead to a second apartment.

While he looked this door opened, and the form of Colonel Green appeared. The boy ducked his head

quickly down, but not too soon to catch a glimpse of another form in the room beyond.

It was five minutes before he ventured to look again. The room was empty.

Cautiously raising the sash Pete slipped noiselessly through the open space, and stood within the room.

Before him was the passage, to his left a bolted door.

CHAPTER VII.

A CAGED BIRD.

We must return to Minnie Ellis, the mystery of whose disappearance yet remains unrevealed.

After leaving her school-companion, whom she had desired to go to the wood with her in search of flowers, she had concluded to go by herself.

It wanted yet two hours of supper-time; her cousin had not met her on her way home, as he had been in the habit of doing, and there was no reason why she should not yield to her inclination.

It was about half a mile to the edge of the woodland, partly through sparsely-built streets, partly by a country lane.

It was a charming spring afternoon. The whole landscape lay bathed in the rays of a genial sun. The sides of the lane were full of the beauty of greensward and modest flowers.

Minnie hastened on delighted.

Within the woods the aspects of Nature changed, but were not less delightful to her. Every blue violet, every white berry-blossom was eagerly plucked. Step by step, in search of floral treasures, she sunk deeper into the woods.

The thoughtless child had failed to notice that a person had followed her, and was now in the wood close behind her.

It was not until he spoke that she became aware of the fact that she was not alone.

"Are you so fond of flowers?" spoke a voice behind her.

Minnie turned, half-alarmed, to see the well-built and well-dressed gentleman standing near her and smiling at her hasty movement.

She recognized him as a person she had often seen in town. Her alarm passed away on seeing a familiar face.

"I am very fond of them," she answered.

"But those are poor ones you have. I think I could easily find prettier."

"Oh, can you?" and her childish enthusiasm broke out. "But that would be too much trouble for you. Please tell me where I may find them."

"It will be no trouble. I was going further into the wood. There is plenty of wild honeysuckle there, and other handsome flowers."

"Why I thought I had been through the whole wood, but I know I never found any honeysuckle." She walked contentedly by his side. "Is it far?"

"Just past that clump of big trees."

The trees were reached and passed, but the promised flowers failed to appear.

She looked at him in surprise.

"I must have been mistaken," he said. "It was in some other part of the wood I saw the flowers."

"I won't trouble you, then, to show me," she said, "and I am ever so much obliged. I think I must be going home now."

"There is a tree of fine dogwood blossoms," he replied; "I can get you some of those."

Without waiting for a reply, he proceeded to gather some of the white flowers, leading her still deeper into the wood.

The child, in the delight of her acquisition, forgot how late it was getting, or how far from home she was.

"Oh, dear!" she suddenly cried out, as they emerged upon the further border of the wood, "see how low the sun is. It must be supper-time, and I am ever so far from home."

"Don't let that worry you, my child," he answered.

ed. "I have a carriage close by here, and will take you home."

"No, indeed! I could not put you to all that trouble."

"But I am going back to town, and it will be no trouble."

"You are sure it will be no trouble?" she asked.

"Not in the least. Are you not fond of riding?"

"Oh, ever so fond! But I am afraid my aunt might not approve of my riding with a strange gentleman; I am sure madame would not."

"Madame? Who is madame?"

"Why, our teacher. At the Young Ladies' Select School, you know."

"Yes, yes; I know madame well. She would have no objection to my driving you home. I know your aunt also. Here is my carriage. Shall I help you in?"

They had now emerged upon a country lane that ran here by the side of the wood.

A partly-closed carriage, drawn by one horse, stood near them—the animal tied to a roadside tree.

He untied the horse, and led it to the middle of the road.

"Now, my dear, allow me," he said. Ere she hardly realized it, he had gently lifted her, and deposited her in the carriage.

In an instant he was beside her, and had started the horse down the road.

She felt rather pleased to be thus forced, as it were, to do as her wishes counseled. She was tired, and the walk home would have been a long one.

Minnie failed to see a figure that stood in the woods at a short distance, looking with sardonic pleasure at this incident. It was the figure of the person who had provided the carriage, and left it in this lonely situation.

"Are you not driving in the wrong direction?" she asked, laying her small hand upon his arm.

"No; the road winds below here. You will be home in twenty minutes."

"I am afraid aunty will be wondering what keeps me. It is past supper-time now."

"It is not six yet," he replied.

They passed several houses built by the roadside, and entered upon a more lonely reach of road.

Soon the carriage drove past a piece of woodland that seemed to stretch to the water's edge.

"Now you are going wrong," she said, in a frightened tone. "You have taken the wrong road, sir, I am sure. Aunty will be so worried about me."

"I believe I am wrong; that's a fact," he said, doubtfully. "I will drive down this way. I think I see a house through the trees there, where I can inquire."

He turned the horse into a narrow track through the woods, the trees on each side nearly grazing the carriage, while a misty evening gloom lay beneath the leafy arches.

Minnie looked eagerly and anxiously forward for the house he had spoken of. Her clear vision could detect nothing of the kind.

They emerged into a small open space, with the river in the background, and a small log house in the center.

"Let me lift you out now, my child. I think we can find our way here."

"I would rather stay here, if you please," she said, falteringly.

"No, no, you must be tired of the carriage."

He lifted her like a feather in his strong arms, and deposited her upon the ground.

Letting the horse stand, he grasped her hand and led her toward the hut.

Minnie held back, not yet quite sure whether she should distrust this new acquaintance. But, heedless of her hesitation, he drew her rapidly forward, and in a minute they had entered the hut.

They were in a sparsely-furnished-room, in whose midst sat and rocked an ill-favored old woman.

"Mrs. Jones," he said, drawing the child toward her, "I have brought you my niece, Susie Thompson,

as I promised. I wish you to take the best of care of her."

Minnie drew her hand out of his grasp, and stood looking at him with wide, fearful eyes.

"Very glad to see her," said the old woman, in a rasping voice. "Guess she and me will get along nice together."

"Why, what do you mean?" cried the child. "Oh, sir, take me home! I must go home!"

"You are home, my dear. Mrs. Jones and you will keep house together for the present."

Minnie looked from one to the other, half-stupesfied with surprise. Then she turned, with a quick movement, and darted to the door.

But her captor was too quick for her. He caught her before she could reach the door and drew her forcibly back.

"What did I tell you, Mrs. Jones?" he said.

Minnie struggled violently to escape.

"Let me go!" she cried, in angry tones, "I must go home! I will go home! It was too bad of you, you wicked man, to bring me here."

"Now, Susie, my dear niece. I am sorry to see you act so, and before Mrs. Jones!"

"I am not Susie! I am not your niece!" screamed the child, in hysterical anger. "I want to go home! I will go home!"

"You see how it is, Mrs. Jones," he said. "She needs correction."

"That is so, Mr. Thompson," spoke the cracked voice of the old woman. "Leave her with me. I'll bring her to."

"I fear she will be too much for you. I will have to lock her in her own room until she learns to behave better."

He picked up the struggling child in his arms and carried her forcibly to the stairs.

"Oh, sir! don't, don't!" she begged, pitifully. "I will do anything, if you will only let me go home. I am sorry, indeed I am, that I spoke to you so."

He made no answer, but bore her up the stairs and to the door of a room in the second story. This he opened and would have placed her on a chair inside, but she clung to him, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Oh, don't leave me with that dreadful old woman! Oh, won't you take me home?"

He disengaged her hands, and hastened to the door. She heard the grating of a bolt behind him. He was gone.

Minnie threw herself on the floor in a paroxysm of grief and fear, sobbing and moaning as if her little heart would break.

The old woman brought her up some supper, left it on the table, and went away unnoticed by her.

It was a dreadful night which the child passed. She was naturally passionate, and broke into ecstasies of anger, beating against the door, and screaming at the top of her voice. These fits were succeeded by spells of weeping, and shuddering dread.

Finally exhausted nature found its anodyne in sleep—a slumber visited by unpleasant dreams—a fitful, unrefreshing sleep.

The next day passed, and the next, and the next, and Minnie continued a close prisoner. Her fits of rage did not return—grief and dread alone possessed her.

Mrs. Jones visited her at meal-times, bringing her food. The old woman usually sought to enter into conversation with her, persistently calling her by the name of Susie. In vain she declared that her name was Minnie Ellis, that she lived in Toledo, and begged piteously to be set free. Mrs. Jones was not to be moved by any such appeals.

Days—months, it seemed to her—of this sad life passed. Her prison grew more and more dreadful to her. Her dislike of her captors grew into a feeling of hatred.

At length one day the opening door revealed, not the expected form of Mrs. Jones, but the figure of the man who had torn her away from her home,

She sprung forward eagerly,

"Oh, sir, you are come to take me home?"

"Not yet, my dear niece. I hope in a few days to take you to your right home, not to Toledo!"

"I am not your niece, and my home is in Toledo!" she cried, with tears in her eyes.

"Now, Susie, if you would only quit talking such nonsense. You will never get out of here while you keep such foolish fancies in your head."

"I am not your niece! My name isn't Susie! You are a bad man, a wicked man! Oh, what did I ever do to you? Oh, sir, do take me home!"

"I will, Susie, when you come to your senses. I only wish you to forget all the nonsense you have been talking, and remember that you are my niece, Susie Thompson."

"I ain't! I ain't! I ain't!" she screamed, in sudden fury. "I would pull my tongue out before I said so. I will never, never, never say so! never, if I die here!"

"Very well, my dear niece, we shall see."

He retired, bolting the door behind him.

She flung herself on her bed, weeping from a revulsion of feeling. A short time passed, when she heard the bolt again cautiously drawn, and saw the door slowly open.

Looking languidly up, she saw the form of Picayune Pete standing just within the room.

With a wild cry of hope and delight she sprung up, flew across the room, and clasped the ragged boy firmly within her arms.

"Oh, Pete!" she said, "take me from this dreadful place!"

"Hush! hush! Minnie," he said. "That man will hear you; that blasted kurnel, that I'm a-going fur."

"I am so glad to see you," she said in lower tones.

"How did you get here?"

"Snaked it," said Pete. "I jist clumb up like a catamount."

A quick, stern step was heard in the passage beyond.

"He is coming back!" said Minnie, frightened.

"Let go of me," said Pete, in resolute, fierce tones. She unclasped her arms and set the boy free.

"So, this is fine," said a satirical voice in the doorway. "My bird has found a mate. I will have two in the cage instead of one."

There was a devilish look upon his face as he pushed the door quickly to.

At that perilous moment Pete's gymnastic exercise stood him in good stead. With the agile leap of a wild-cat he sprung against the half-closed door, hurling it wide open, and almost prostrating Colonel Green, who was seeking to close it.

CHAPTER VIII.

NICODEMUS TO THE RESCUE.

COLONEL GREEN was dazed for an instant by the suddenness of Pete's movements, and the violence with which the door had been flung open in his face.

Recovering himself instantaneously he seized a cane that stood near and rushed at Pete. Grasping the boy by the throat with one hand he raised the cane to strike.

At that moment the half-closed door was flung violently open, and a small animal bounded into the room.

It was Nicodemus, Pete's faithful dog. With a single look the intelligent animal took in the whole situation and the danger of his master.

With a short bark he sprung forward and buried his teeth deep in the colonel's calf.

With a quick cry of pain he released the boy and turned to the assault of this new foe, kicking and cursing vigorously as he tried to get rid of his savage antagonist, who hung on with fierce tenacity.

The blow intended for the master fell with spiteful force on the dog, who rolled howling over on the floor.

The fiercest passions of the man were now aroused. He grasped the cane with both hands, and glared round the room. Nicodemus still lay howling on the

floor. Pete crouched in a corner, not yet recovered from the terrible choking he had received.

But in the doorway stood still another person, a man who seemed to have followed the dog into the house. He was a stout, determined-looking man. In his right hand he held a pistol, cocked and presented.

In the passage behind him stood the small figure of Minnie Ellis, her blue eyes wide open in wonder and dread. She had escaped through the open door of her prison.

Pete recognized the new-comer at a glance as the policeman who had so lately arrested him.

"Now your goose's cooked, kurnel," he said feebly, but with his old vim.

"Who are you?" cried the colonel, fiercely. "What brings you here?"

"I am a policeman of the city of Toledo," said the officer. "It is my purpose to arrest you as the abductor of Minnie Ellis, and to shoot you if you attempt to escape."

His finger was at the trigger of the pistol. The look on his face showed that he meant all he said.

The villain glared with a wild, desperate glance round the room with something of the look of a wild beast at bay.

"That for the barker!" cried the desperate man, springing suddenly forward, and with a quick, upward blow of his stick knocking the pistol from the hands of the officer.

The weapon was discharged as it fell, the ball whistling past the ears of Pete.

The officer stepped back from this sudden assault, his fingers tingling with pain from the blow they had received.

Colonel Green lost no time in taking advantage of the opportunity thus afforded him.

A single spring took him through the doorway, and he rushed desperately for the open air, followed by Nicodemus, who had regained his lost assurance.

Seizing his pistol, the officer rushed out after him.

Pete, too, was following, but the face of Minnie in the passageway brought him to a sudden halt.

She was pressed up closely against the wall, her face pallid with fear, her hands extended as if to ward off danger.

"Why, Minnie," cried Pete. "Don't be skeered, gal. Nobody ain't a-goin' to hurt you. That catamount has made tracks, but it's my notion that he'll be bringed up with a hitch. It ain't no slouch, the feller that's after him!"

"Was anybody shot, Pete?" asked the startled child. "I heard the pistol go off."

"Well, it kinder scraped my ear," said Pete, feeling his organ of hearing. "Ain't no blood, though. Reckon I'm all sound."

"Take me out of this dreadful place, won't you, Pete?" she half-whispered. "There's the woman in that room. I am so much afraid of her."

"Ain't got nothing to be afriad of while I'm along," said Pete, drawing his form up proudly. "Bet the kurnel don't git you back— Ha! what's up now?"

This exclamation was caused by another pistol report, outside the house. Taking Minnie by the hand, Pete hurried out.

There was a striking scene in view as they reached the open air. The river, as we have said, ran close by the house, just beyond the clump of bushes that had sprung up around the old log cabin.

It was not properly the river that lay before them, however, for the clearing had been made just above the mouth of the Maumee, and the broad reach of water, dotted over with coming and departing vessels, that lay spread before them was Maumee Bay, the southwestern extremity of Lake Erie.

Near at hand was a scene of more vital excitement. About one hundred feet from the bank of the river floated a boat, of which Colonel Green was just setting the sail. The white sheet had already caught the wind, and the light craft was beginning to feel its force and glide through the water,

On the bank stood the basled officer, having just fired at the fugitive the sole remaining load of his pistol.

Colonel Green had seized the sail-boat which Pete had noticed tied to the bank, and had thus escaped his pursuer.

"The fellow threw me off the track by pretending to fly to the woods," said the latter to Pete. "I chased him through the bushes yonder. But the cunning reprobate doubled on me, and was aboard the boat before I could get out of the woods again. I am afraid he has escaped us for the present."

Pete stood looking after the boat with fixed, resolute face, then he said:

"It's too bad we didn't catch the scoundrel, but you kin bet high I'll nab him yet. Think we'd best make tracks for home. What do you think?"

They were all of the same opinion and accordingly the trio followed by the faithful dog started homeward.

CHAPTER IX.

NOW MUCH A GIRL IS WORTH.

It is wonderful how sometimes intelligence will pass through a city. It seems to be caught up by the wind and blown to men's minds, so quickly does it disseminate itself.

The fact of the rescue of Minnie Ellis was known to men half over the city before she had got fairly into the city.

This resulted from the intense interest which every one felt in the matter, and the eagerness with which each one hastened to repeat the tidings he had heard.

All who had children of their own felt keenly the danger to themselves if their loved ones could be stolen from the heart of a populous city. All hearts then, were gladdened at the rescue, and a revengeful hope that the abductor had been captured was at once aroused.

On that day in particular the people of Toledo were specially exercised on the matter, as some of the prominent citizens, doubting if every effort had been made, had again called a meeting for consideration of the best action to be taken.

The hall was thronged with deeply-interested persons, seriously debating what was best to be done.

One of the wealthy citizens, full of appreciation of the advantage of financial arguments, had offered on his own responsibility an additional reward, for the return of Minnie Ellis, without reference to the capture of her abductor.

"It is very well, gentlemen, to argue," he said, "that we are offering a premium to rascality by this reward, and laying a plan to pay the villain for his crime. But, is there not another side to the question? Shall this innocent child be sacrificed to our selfish fear for ourselves? Shall her family suffer because there is some faint dread of danger to our own children? You can let the reward you have offered for the capture of the criminal stand. I have no objection to that. But I intend to offer two thousand more, on my own account, for the child's recovery, and hope some of you may add to it."

The latter part of his remarks was interrupted by a faint murmur about the door of the hall, but it failed to interrupt the speaker.

"That's the talk for me!" cried a rich old grain speculator, springing up in the hall. "I wouldn't for a hundred thousand lose my daughter, and I'm good for two thousand more."

"And I'll make up the five," screamed another, in great excitement. "She is worth as much any day as the confounded rascal that carried her off."

"She is worth more," cried a wealthy operator in pork, eagerly springing to his feet. "I've had a dear child die, and it was a severe blow to me, gentlemen. But I'd rather have her dead ten times than stolen in this way, and not know where she is or what is done with her. I am good for another thousand."

He had to raise his voice almost to a scream to overcome the growing noise in the lower part of the

hall. The faint murmur had risen to the eager buzz of a hundred voices.

"Your offers are accepted," said the president of the meeting. "And I venture to return you the thanks of the community for your public spirit. But what is the meaning of that noise? We cannot go on with such an uproar."

A dozen voices were raised in answer, so confusing each other that only the name "Minnie Ellis" could be distinguished.

"We must have order!" cried the president. "Let some one speak. Mr. Rochester, can you tell me the meaning of this disturbance?"

"There has been something found out about the child. I cannot make out just what."

"What is it? Who knows?" asked the president, eagerly rising.

Ere any definite answer could be had, a new excitement arose at the door of the hall. The crowd swayed back and forward, as if driven by a force from without, and finally split bodily asunder, some persons without forcing themselves like a wedge into the mass.

At the same time a chorus of shouts and cheers broke from a throng of people who had suddenly gathered in the surrounding street. Whatever the cause, they seemed to be wild with enthusiasm.

All semblance of order in the meeting now broke up. Everybody was on his feet, all eyes bent on the door, every tongue eagerly questioning.

The new-comers pressed still forward into the body of the hall.

They consisted of the officer, Pete and Minnie Ellis, followed by several friends, one of whom pushed his way to the platform and cried:

"Now, my friends, three ringing cheers and a tiger! The lost is found, the dead is alive again. If they ain't, Lake Erie is a frog pond!"

As he spoke he raised Minnie in his arms, revealing the form so well known to many of the audience, of Minnie Ellis.

Her golden ringlets, her bright blue eyes, and happy, smiling face, acted upon all present like a draught of exhilarating wine. The cheers called for rung out with a vehemence that seemed to shake the walls of the building, and the tiger ran through the room like a peal of thunder.

"Three more for her brave rescuer!" shouted an individual in the audience.

A thundering roll of hurrahs again rung through the hall.

"Don't be cheering for me. I had nothing to do with it," cried the honest friend, depositing Minnie upon a table beside him, where she stood facing the assemblage.

The events of the last hour had worked strongly upon her nervous organization. She was in a state of almost hysterical excitement, her eyes sparkling, her lips quivering, while a light seemed to emanate from her face, so full was it of joyful expression.

"Who then have we to thank for this happy recovery?" cried the president, in his excitement catching up the child and eagerly kissing her.

This impulsive act sent another wave of excitement and uproar through the hall.

"Here's Picayune Pete!" shouted the boy, stepping forward, "and there's the gal—there's Minnie! Said I'd fotch her, and I fotched her. Pete never goes back on his word, does he, Nicodemus?"

Pete's faithful dog, who had followed him in, responded by a loud bark.

The cheers without were taken up within, as Pete was quickly passed from hand to hand to the platform, where he stood surveying the audience with his usual independence, and with a sense of triumph beaming from his face.

"Tell you what, folks," he cried, "Nick and me done our level best to cotch the kurnel. But the kurnel flung us. He flung us bad, folks. Anyhow, we fotched the gal, and that's worth nine cheers and a Bengal tiger. Open your mouths and let her out with a will, my noble feller-citizens."

Again the hall trembled, as a thousand voices responded in ringing cheers to this stirring appeal.

"Here he is!" answered the captain, pointing to the police officer, who stood beside him.

"No, no!" cried the officer, repressing another effort to cheer. "It wasn't I that found her. I was only a secondary hand in the business."

"Who was it, then?" roared a stentorian voice from the audience.

"It was Picayune Pete," spoke the childish, musical tones of Minnie. "He saved my life when I fell overboard, and he has saved me again now—Picayune Pete, the little ragged street boy."

The excited audience again cheered at the sound of her voice. The name of Picayune Pete passed through the hall in various tones of wonder, amusement and recognition.

"Where is this boy, this Pete?" asked the president.

"Will not the officer tell us the particulars of this affair?" asked the person who had first offered the additional reward.

The officer, thus brought forward, proceeded to give a succinct description of what he knew of the abduction, detailing the arrest of Picayune Pete, his orders to follow him, his being led by the dog to the log-cabin, his timely rescue of the boy, and the escape of the villain.

This story was not finished without many interruptions and expressions of approval and interest by the listeners.

"Now, can we not hear from Minnie Ellis herself?" asked a gentleman on the floor of the hall. "Will she not tell how this villain succeeded in carrying her off?"

The excited child, thus questioned, proceeded to describe her adventures, the audience listening with spellbound interest as her sweet, clear tones sounded through the hall, and reached the ears of listeners in the street without.

There was no interruption to her detailed and child-like narrative, all within hearing remaining as still as death while she proceeded to describe her various adventures, till finally discovered by Pete.

The excited turmoil of voices that followed the conclusion of this narrative was broken by another incident. A man hastily forced his way into the hall, the packed assemblage making way for him as he advanced, his uplifted hand holding a slip of paper.

"A telegraph message!" he cried, still pressing forward.

"What is it?" cried a dozen voices. "Is he captured? Has he escaped?"

"We telegraphed on to every station where there is an agent, within twenty miles of the city," said the man. "A man answering Colonel Green's description left the train at Forest station, ten miles out from Toledo. He bought a rifle from the store-keeper there, and a horse from the hotel. He has put off north through the big woods that stretch up-country from here."

"Has the alarm been given?"

"Yes; but it is feared he has escaped. He had a good horse and a half-hour start. There is no telegraphing up that way. Parties have started out in pursuit; but if he is as smart as he looks they won't find him."

"This is too bad!" cried the grain speculator, in answer. "Picayune Pete has earned his six thousand, but there is a reward out yet for that villain. The hue and cry must be raised everywhere; the whole country must join in the search. Telegraph at once to every point. Send word out by every train. Rouse the whole country. I will be good for the expense."

Shortly after this the meeting adjourned.

CHAPTER X.

PETE AS A GENTLEMAN OF WEALTH.

Pete remained for several days the lion of Toledo. His adventures were in everybody's mouth, and he

was invited to relate them himself to persons who, a few days before, would have scorned to look at him.

But the amount of satisfaction they received depended very much on the manner in which they approached our young friend. He was innately rebellious to any assumption of superiority, and had a way of his own of putting down condescension, which people in general called impudence, but which he considered manly independence.

Those, therefore, who thought to patronize him, found that they had picked up a very rough chestnut-bur, and, like the man who picked up the hot iron, dropped him without waiting to be told.

But, Pete had ceased to be a person of no account. He was now a young gentleman of property, and was not going to be condescended to. Though, for that matter, money had very little influence on his manners. His natural sense of independence needed no bolstering.

The six thousand dollars which had been impulsively contributed on the occasion of the last public meeting, was freely paid over, but the donors reserved to themselves the right of deciding what should be done with it.

The result of their deliberation was that one thousand dollars should go to the policeman for his part in the affair, and the remaining five thousand should be paid over to Pete.

The announcement of this fact to the boy was as if Fairyland had suddenly opened to him. If the sum had been a million, it would have seemed no more to Pete's fancy than did the five thousand. The amount of his utmost fortune so far had been from two to three dollars at a time, and the breadth of gold-paved space that now opened before him was perfectly illimitable.

The gentlemen who had contributed Pete's wealth took the further trouble to invest it for him. What this meant the boy had not the least idea, but the mystery with which it surrounded his new-gained fortune added wonderfully to the largeness of his fortune in his eyes.

During these days a feeling of great relief had replaced the former uneasiness of the citizens. The fear that each father of a family might himself be the next victim of the child-stealers, had produced great mental disquiet in Toledo. The rescue of Minnie, therefore, and the discovery of who the abductor was, had relieved this anxiety. Even if Colonel Green was not captured, he would not appear in Toledo again.

The efforts to arrest him had, so far, proved failures. The country to the north had been widely scoured, and his movements had been traced in several instances, but in all cases too late. He managed to keep just beyond the reach of capture.

Mrs. Jones, however, fell into the hands of the law, having ventured into Toledo after her escape from the old house.

But her arrest proved of no benefit. She was subject to a rigid examination, but displayed a seeming ignorance of the objects of the colonel, and a simplicity of manner that completely baffled her questioners.

The effect of imprisonment was tried on her, but nothing was gained by it. She was either very simple or very shrewd, and was finally released under the belief that she was really free from any criminal complicity with Colonel Green. She persistently declared that he had made her believe that Minnie was his niece.

What the villain's real object had been remained a mystery. His efforts to make the child assume a false name seemed intended to make her forget her own. The most popular theory was that he had been hired to make way with her by the person whom Pete had seen in his company, but had formed the plan of keeping her in his own hands for future profitable employment.

Who this third person was no one could conjecture. Under the theory it must be some one who had a personal interest in the removal of Minnie

Ellis. The only person in Toledo to whom this idea could possibly apply was William Deaton, her cousin.

But Pete settled this theory by denying that this person bore any resemblance to the man he had seen.

This left the theorist entirely at sea, and it began to seem as if the villains were destined to escape, despite all efforts to capture them.

In fact, William Denton had met his cousin's return with a genuineness of emotion that seemed incompatible with crime. He could not congratulate her enough on her rescue, and his matter-of-fact mother was quite surprised to learn what an affectionate feeling her son felt toward his cousin.

In fact, congratulations and evidences of affectionate interest, flowed upon Minnie from so many quarters that the child was overwhelmed with happiness to find what a wide circle of friends she had, and how deeply they loved her. She was at that tender age which takes people's words at the meaning given them in the dictionary.

There was one idea that was most firmly implanted in her mind, which was that she owed a large debt of gratitude to Picayune Pete.

Efforts were made to convince her that he had been entirely mercenary in his intentions, and that it was the reward alone that had made him trouble himself about her.

"I have not paid him," said Minnie. "I have not even thanked him. And I know he did think of me more than the money."

"He would not know what you meant by thanks," said her aunt. "Kicks and coppers, as the old saying goes, are the only argument with that kind."

"I saw his face when he found me," persisted Minnie. "I know that he thought of me, and not of the money. And look at his dreadful ignorance, and the bad boys he goes with, and the bad ways he has. I would not be doing my duty if I did not try to make him better."

"Why, my cousin Minnie is not going out as a missionary among the heathen on the streets?" laughed William.

"I can't help it if you do laugh," she replied. "I must do something."

The grateful child had a harder task than she imagined.

She had not yet returned to school. In fact, it was now drawing near to the annual vacation, and her aunt thought it best, after the shock she had received, not to send her back to school during the present session.

A full detail of these facts and intentions was written to Minnie's father in California, and his advice asked as to continuing her at Madame Lucon's school.

Meanwhile the child was busily looking through Toledo for Pete. She failed to find him, however.

Somewhat discouraged by her failure, she next asked her cousin William to try and find him for her. The latter reluctantly consented, after Minnie's earnest request.

Fortune proved more favorable to him than to her, as he met Pete without any effort at search.

He had but little trouble in exacting a promise from Pete to call on Minnie next day.

Pete was in earnest in his promise to pay a visit to Minnie, but he had arrived at a new conclusion for him, namely, that he was not presentable in the best society.

We must learn our deficiencies before we can correct them, and Pete had just gained one useful lesson, which was destined to work an important change in his appearance and manners.

Reforms are of slow growth, however, and Pete's improvement could not be expected to progress very rapidly.

The first evidence he had given of it was his sense of shame on finding that his hands had soiled Minnie's pure white fingers.

But he was now possessed of invested wealth, and

his new consequence demanded something more than washed hands.

His face and feet were alike made acquainted with an unusual quantity of pure water, a vigorous application of comb straightened his wild locks into something approaching civilized neatness, and he induced his patrons to advance enough to set him up in a respectable suit of clothes, including shoes and hat. Thus equipped, Pete started off on his projected visit to Minnie.

Minnie received her new visitor with great surprise. At first glance she did not know him, so metamorphosed was he.

"Thought I'd step round and see how you were getting on," was Pete's salutation.

"Why, if it ain't Pete!" she cried, her wonder giving place to delight. "Well, I declare, if this is not too good in you! And such a change, too!"

She walked round and round him, as if he had been a statue, and she an art critic.

"Thought I'd git myself up a bit, you know," said Pete, backwardly.

"Why, Pete, you are a real young gentleman. I had no idea what a good-looking boy you were."

"Oh, now, drop all that," said Pete, somewhat angrily. "Didn't come here for you to make fun of me."

"Why, Pete," she cried, in distressed tones, "I had no idea of such a thing. You are a good-looking boy, and I just mean it. Sit down, Pete; I ought not to keep you standing."

"Oh, nonsense now, gal. I ken stand ten hours at a stretch, and not give in. Ain't much given to cheers."

"But I want you to sit down. It is not polite to keep you standing."

"I'll squat then if that's the how—I'll sit down, I mean."

"I am so glad you came, Pete. I have not seen you, and had no chance to thank you, and I wanted so much to do so. I owe you so much, and I can never repay you for your goodness."

"Good-by, gal. I'm goin' to slope," said Pete, making for the door.

"Why, what is the matter with you?" cried she, pulling him back. "I cannot let you go that way. What have I done?"

"You're piling it on a bit too thick, that's all. I ain't comin' here to fish for compliments, not me."

"And you won't let me thank you? After all you have done, too?"

"Haven't I got paid for it?"

"I have not paid you."

"I ain't talkin' about the money. That's no account. I went for you, and I brought you. That's pay enough."

"And I am going to thank you for it; and you have got to be still and let me. You must sit there and hear just what I have to say. And I will thank you till I am tired." The willful little beauty placed her hands on Pete's arms and affected to hold him in his chair.

"Spin it out, then, quick as you know how. Tain't the kind of grub I'm used to."

"Pete, do you know you talk dreadful bad? I wish you would try and pronounce more correctly. Madame would be horrified to hear you."

"Madame be blowed!" growled Pete, angrily. "Madame's an old fraud. I keer more for your little finger than a ship full of madames."

"I wish you would come around here often and see me, and let me teach you. I would so like it. I'm not going to school any more this season."

"Me keep comin' here? A little vagabond like me?"

"You are not a vagabond. I won't let you, nor anybody, say so."

"Why, the old woman would take the broom to me, and I would have to git quicker. Lookin' fur her now, out of the corner of my left eye."

"She won't trouble you. I would like to see her try it!" and her blue eyes flashed. "I just want

you to come round here. Come every day, if you will. I am going to teach you to be a good boy, and to take the best of care of yourself, and to talk correctly, and—"

She was interrupted by a low laugh from Pete.

"Now what are you laughing at? What have I said ridiculous?"

"It is all ridic'lous," said Pete, still laughing. "If you only knowed what a uphill job you was a-cuttin' out. You mought as well try to make a pair of snuffers out of a pine stump."

"Do you mean that I can't do you any good?"

"I think it's sorter desp'ratin'."

"Will you come and let me try?"

"I ain't got no objections."

"We shall see then what a grateful little girl can do."

Pete's interview with Minnie did not last much longer. His store-clothes were sitting stiffly upon him, and he was eager to get them off and feel like himself again.

He had still other new ideas to his head, gained during the last few days. The principal of these was the importance of his going to work to make a respectable living, instead of indulging in the vagabond life to which he had been so addicted.

Nor did he neglect Minnie's invitation. Her offer to teach him had no great attraction in his eyes. But Minnie herself was an attraction, and her kind imperiousness was submitted to by Pete with a meekness that surprised himself. It would not have done for any of the boys to try it.

The boy did improve under her instructions. The most marked part of this progress, however, was in his manners and appearance, which improved more rapidly than his speech under her gentle training.

But Pete was not able to continue this course of life indefinitely. His new idea of making himself useful to the world induced him to ship for a voyage on the lakes.

His trip was to Mackinaw, and the captain expected to be several weeks absent. But to Pete it was a good opportunity to earn money, make himself useful, and at the same time gratify his love of adventure and fondness for physical exercise.

The ship was no longer in discharging and making up a cargo than her captain expected, and it was nearly two months before she cast anchor again in Toledo.

One of Pete's first visits, after returning home and donning his good clothes, was to his friend and tutor, Minnie.

Mrs. Denton met him at the door—a very unusual circumstance.

"My niece, Minnie!" she said, in reply to his question. "Is it possible you don't know about my niece Minnie?"

"What's wrong?" he asked, in quick apprehension. "Been away two months. Not stole ag'in 'em?"

"No. Her father has sent for her. She has gone to California."

"To Californy?" said Pete, with a long whistle of disappointment and surprise. "Well, that's a high old dodge. When did she go, if it's a square question?"

"Three days ago."

"She mought have waited a bit longer. How do people git to Californy?"

"She went by rail to St. Louis. From there I judge they will go by some emigrant train."

"Who tuk her?"

"My son William."

"Well, if this ain't a queer dodge. Leave any word for me?"

"She never thought to trouble herself about you. Are you done questioning? I have no time to stand here."

"Dig in, then. I don't keer a raw 'tater where she goes. You kin go back to your scrubbin' and broom-in' soon as you've a mind. Picayune Pete's an inde-

pendent sorter chap, and don't keer nothin' for nobody."

With this impudent fling, and without waiting for Mrs. Denton's sharp answer, Pete made haste from the neighborhood.

But as he went, deep cogitations possessed his mind.

"So she's gone to Californy, and my son William's tuk her, hey?" he said to himself. "It's a rum dodge; if it ain't I'll sell out. Wonder if she'll git to Californy with my son William? Got a notion that that young gent ain't a cherubim. Tell you what, my cruise is sailed out, and I kin ship where I please. Guess Mr. Smith will fork over a few dingbats out of my investment. Californy's a mighty nice place, and if I don't go there I'm a rooster. A young chap of my inches mought come in handy on the way, if my son William tries any of his tricks, or if Kurnel Green turns up. I've a notion that little Minnie's like a chicken amon a nest of foxes. If I ain't a-goin' to catch up to them and keep an eye on the little gal, I'll sell out. That's me."

CHAPTER XI.

WESTWARD HO!

It was no light task which Pete had laid out for himself. He had no clear idea, it is true, of the magnitude of this task, but if he had known the route to bristle with dangers it would not have deterred him.

Besides, Minnie was crossing these plains and climbing these mountains; Minnie was in danger not only from red-men, but from white savages. The boy, from "hating girls," had grown to worship this one charming little girl. Where peril threatened her there duty commanded him to be.

His last glance at William Denton had filled his mind with a new thought. Something in the attitude of the man, some warning impression perhaps, had reminded Pete of the man he had seen talking to Colonel Green.

It was a passing impression; gone almost instantly, but the boy could not get it from his mind.

A vague sense of danger to his young tutor haunted him; and a new-born sense of duty impelled him to fly to her rescue.

"There's a screw loose somewhere; I'll sell my hat if there ain't," said Pete, to the gentleman who was acting as custodian of his funds. "Dunno what made the gal's father want her in Californy in such a hurry, anyhow."

"It was very natural, my lad," said his guardian; "after the danger she had escaped he naturally feared to leave her out of his own care."

"S'pose it was somehow that way," said Pete. "But if he ain't got her in a wuss scrape, then I'll cave. I'm goin' to make a clean streak after that gal. Come to strike you for a little dough to help me out."

"A little what?" asked the gentleman, in surprise.

"A few dingbats."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm blowed if I 'spected that you didn't know English better nor me," said Pete, without a particle of reverence or respect for his guardian. "Can't travel on tick, you know. Want you to set me up in the necessary."

"Is it money you want?"

"Reckon I've been sayin' so enough."

"See here, my boy," said the gentleman. "Your money is out on interest, and there will be nothing due for six months. I have already advanced you twenty-five dollars from my own pocket."

"Dunno nothing 'bout interest," said Pete. "I'm making tracks straight for California, and maybe you'll not see me for two year to come. Maybe never. I want a hundred and fifty, flat down, and I'm bound to have it, that's wuss."

"It's out of my hands, Pete. All I can get is the interest, and that not till it is due. However, if you can show me the need of it, I may advance the sum you require."

"Maybe I've been a bit too fast," said Pete, through whose mind a sense of the gentleman's meaning began to creep. "Hope I ain't been impudent."

"A little hasty, Pete," said his guardian, smiling. "Let me hear your reasons for needing this money."

Pete, with some mental reservation, gave his objects with sufficient fullness to convince the gentleman that it was no mere boyish whim to spend money that possessed him. He finally agreed to advance him the money, with the proviso that he should assist him in making the necessary purchases.

To this Pete readily assented. He had, in fact, no definite idea of the requisites for a journey across the plains, except that he wanted a rifle and a revolver. His mind was filled with some indefinite notion of fighting his way to California. He left everything else to his guardian, but he fancied he was a better judge of "shooting irons" himself, and was bound to select his own weapons.

A large delegation of his youthful friends gathered at the depot of the Chicago and Toledo railroad to see Pete off, and our hero, with his pioneer suit, his weapons, his knapsack, and his general Kit Carsonish air, was the subject of boundless admiration.

Even Nicodemus, who kept close to his heels, found more admirers than he fancied, and showed his teeth, more than once, to the enthusiastic crowd.

A chorus of cheers rent the air as the train moved off, with our hero on board.

Pete had never journeyed more than four miles in the cars before, and this continuous rattling over hundreds of miles of prairie and forest, past numberless towns, and through great cities, was a new and astonishing experience to him.

At length they entered a small but bustling city, near the western boundary of Missouri, and the voyage by rail ended.

They were in Independence, at that time the western limit of railroad travel, though projects were already busy in men's minds which would carry the iron rail far to the west.

But as yet only the wagon train had dared to encounter the perils and interminable spread of the mighty Western plains, and the unknown dangers of the mountain chains beyond.

Independence was the center of a bustling trade in emigrants' goods, its streets were cut by the broad wheels of toiling wagons, and rudely-dressed, daring adventurers could be seen in throngs on its avenues, day and night.

Emigration westward was increasing in extent yearly, almost daily. Wagon-trains, supposed to be strong enough to defy Indian attacks, left the city weekly. Daily, trappers and hunters, disdaining the protection of numbers, struck off on foot or horse across the plains, or returned to the city, laden with the fruits of their enterprise.

Pete, despite the strangeness of his new experiences, did not lose his native self-possession.

He lost no time in making inquiries concerning the objects of his search. But people in this bustling locality seemed to have too much business of their own to know anything concerning others.

Several hours passed before he gained any trace of Minnie and her cousin.

At length the keeper of a general utility store answered his question in the affirmative.

"A pretty little girl, was it?" he asked. "A neat, blue-eyed creature, with long, yellow hair?"

"Just her photograph, for a bushel of beans!" cried Pete. "Anybody with her?"

"Yes, a tall, good-looking fellow, dressed in gray pants and a brown coat."

"And would it be botherin' too much to ask when this was?"

"Three days ago."

"It's them or I don't know a catfish from a perch! Gone out yet?"

"Yes. They left that day, in Joe English's train.

They are far ahead now, for Joe don't lose any time."

"I'm after them, then, like lightnin' after a telegraph wire. Much obliged." And Pete was walking off.

"There's a train making up now," called the man after him, "if you are going to cross the plains. Only you're a young one to be making that trip without company."

"How soon will the train be a-goin'?"

"Day as er to-morrow."

"Won't gee for me, then. I'm after the train ahead. Only three days the start of me. Bet I pull that up afore a week. Good-by."

Flinging his rifle over his shoulder, and whistling up Nicodemus, Pete set off with a long stride that soon carried him beyond the limits of the town.

An hour's walk from the town brought him to the banks of a broad, majestic river. It was the Missouri, which here constituted the border between the civilized life of the old settled States and the mighty wilderness beyond.

A ferry-boat soon placed him on the western side of this liquid border, and on the soil of the Territory of Kansas.

It had been late in the afternoon when he started from Independence, and night was now rapidly approaching. Pete obtained lodgings for himself and dog in a public house on the western shore of the river.

The next day dawned fresh and clear, a charming September morning. The sun had only fairly risen when Pete had dispatched his breakfast, given Nicodemus the picking of some tempting bones, and was ready again for his journey.

The boy looked born for the plains as he trod, with a firm step, down the hard earth road, made by the broad wheels of countless emigrant wagons.

He passed numerous wagons on the road; some emigrant teams, bound, like himself, further west; others the lighter and swifter vehicles of neighborhood traffic.

Pete, with his ease at introducing himself, and readiness at making friends, soon fraternized with these fellow-travelers, and succeeded in getting several rides for himself and dog during the day.

He lost no opportunity of questioning concerning the objects of his journey, being anxious to learn how far ahead of him they really were.

"Joe English's train?" said a thriving farmer of the neighborhood, who was giving Pete a lift of a few miles. "I know Joe like a book. He's a tip-top guide. Passed here—let me see—this is Thursday. Passed on Monday. Bound for Santa Fe."

"For California, I reckon," said Pete.

"For Santa Fe, sure as shooting. Told me so himself."

"The ones I'm after are goin' to California, anyhow."

"They will have to split off then. It's a long train and may break up."

"How far ahead do you think they are?"

"Fifty or sixty miles. I calculate. It's a mule train, light freight. Won't make less than twenty miles a day."

Night settled on Pete some thirty-five miles from his starting-point of that morning, more than half of which distance he had made in various vehicles.

It was easy to get lodgings for the night. Places of entertainment stood here and there along the road, made necessary by the constant stream of emigration. They were destined in a few years to become the stations of the overland stage route to the Pacific.

The next day Pete found himself in a more unsettled country. Ranches were few and far between. No villages or towns appeared. Few travelers were met.

He got few lifts that day, but trudged on with unconquerable spirit.

A third day broke on Pete and Nicodemus still

struggling westward. The dog had accommodated himself to the situation, though he still wore an injured expression.

Pete's determination was still unconquerable; but two days of incessant travel, with a heavy weight on his shoulders, had taken some of the vim out of him, and he walked on in silence.

Thus until near noon they passed through almost unbroken solitude, the ranches now becoming very few, while the single emigrant wagons had almost vanished.

They were nearing that point where travelers had to band together for protection from possible Indian raids. However peaceful appearing, the red-men of the plains were not to be trusted without a good show of force.

"Tell you what, Nicodemus," said Pete, at length; "dunno what you think about it, but it's my notion that this thing's about played. We kin make ten mile a day more than that mule-train, Nick, and that'll soon count. But I don't see no sort of use wearin' my legs out when there's plenty of hosses about. There weren't less than a hundred at the last ranch. Only got ten dollars left, dorg, and that won't buy a hoss, and I've been brung up too pious to steal one. But you kin say what you please, Nicodemus, I'm bound to have a hoss."

The dog barked and ran eagerly ahead, his nose in the air.

"Hallo! what's up, Nick?" cried Pete, looking eagerly forward.

As he did see two graceful animals which had been grazing on the prairie before him, take alarm and bound off at a wonderful pace.

Pete looked after them with astonished eyes.

"They ain't buffaloes, that's certain," he said. "Nor they ain't prairie dogs. Wonder if they're them antelopes that fellow back there talked about."

The agile animals flew on like the wind, and soon disappeared behind the wooded border of a stream.

There were numerous birds flitting and singing about, and the boy's senses, in love with nature as he had always been, took in with delight these scenes of beauty.

But a new impulse was roused in him as the uneasy dog started up some larger birds, which flew with a heavy flight away from him.

With the instinct of the sportsman he brought the rifle to his shoulder, glanced along the sights and pulled the trigger.

His quick, true eye had taken deadly aim. The bird fell with a dull thud to the ground.

The well-trained dog flew to pick up the game, while Pete, with his sportsman's habits, hastened to reload his rifle.

Nicodemus brought in a bird utterly unknown to Pete. It was a large, mottled bird, of the size of a chicken, with what seemed a pair of small, extra wings on its neck, and a slight crest on its head.

"Not a bad shot that," cried a voice near him, as he stood weighing the bird in his hand.

Pete turned hastily, to see beside him a man on horseback, who had approached unobserved during his preoccupation.

He was a tall, muscular man, with heavily-bearded face. A long rifle lay across the saddle before him. His right hand held the bridle of a led horse.

"Wasn't a bad shot for a boy," he repeated, "to bring down a prairie hen, at that distance, on the wing."

"This is a prairie hen, is it?" asked Pete, holding up the bird.

"Sartainly. Don't know much about these diggin's, boy, or you wouldn't ask that. Where away? You're a young one to be out of sight of the settlements alone."

"I'm goin' to put myself further out of sight then," said Pete. "I'm bound for California."

"Whew!" whistled the new-comer, with a gesture of surprise.

"I'm after a train that's forty or fifty mile ahead," said Pete.

"S'pect to catch it afoot! The Injuns will gobble you up, sure as shooting, boy. Best turn tail and make a bee-line for the settlements. The red-skins are raising thunder ahead."

"I kin hit an Injun on the wing as well as a prairie chicken," said Pete, boldly. "I'm goin' ahead if there's ten war-parties on the trail. Why don't you turn back yourself?"

"Me?" and the man laughed as if highly amused. "Me turn back for Injuns? Why, boy, they're my reg'lar diet. I generally abolish a dozen of the rascals to get up my appetite for dinner. I'm Bill Grubb, the scout. Mought have heard of me."

"Can't say as I have," answered Pete. "I'm Picayune Pete. Maybe you mought have heered of me?"

"You're a young hoss, Pete, I'll bet that," said the scout, laughing. "Good on the trigger, and got the right spirit in you. Goin' West myself, and wouldn't mind havin' you for company. What do you want with the train ahead?"

Pete, who had been greatly taken with the honest face and free manner of the scout, made no hesitation in relating his object.

"'Cordin' to your story there's deviltry afoot," said the scout. "Now I'm death on deviltry. Got a spare hoss here, Pete, which I was goin' to leave at the next ranch. Hop on, my lively youngster. Kind of took a liking to you. Guess you and I will ride pards for a day or two, anyhow. That your dog?"

"I bet. He's some guns of a dorg, too. Ain't many such dogs. Speak for yourself, Nicodemus."

The dog barked loudly in response. He looked up at their new friend as if he felt that he might be trusted.

"He'll do," said the scout. "Let him trot after. Hop up."

Pete needed no second invitation. With the bound of a young athlete he was in an instant on the horse's back.

Grasping the reins, and laying his rifle and game before him, he was ready for the road.

CHAPTER XII.

RED SKINS AND RIFLES.

The two new friends jogged on together with a friendliness that soon became intimacy. The scout was amused by the shrewdness and odd ways of the boy, and found himself liking him more and more with every mile of their journey.

The scout's horses were good stock and they made excellent time over the hard-trodden earth road which had been made by countless emigrant wagons.

As they went Pete's tongue ran on as rapidly. He was not long in acquainting Bill Grubb, his new friend, with the circumstances that had led to his present enterprise, including all the particulars of the abduction.

"What did you say the fellow's name is that's with her?" asked the scout.

"William Denton—he's a first cousin of hers."

"And the chap that ran away with her—what was his autograph?"

"He called hisself Kurnel Green. Dunno if that were his name."

"Colonel Green, eh? And a born devil, out-and-out. I know him, Pete, like a breeze. And I don't owe him no good wishes, neither. He was in Independence last week."

"Ha!" cried Pete. "See him there?"

"Bet I did. Mought have had a little scrimmage with him, too, only he slid somewhere. The rascal's got a dozen faces and twenty names. Wouldn't wonder if he were with the train now, under false colors."

"What for?" asked Pete, with a startled look.

"See here, my boy, I'm a man of the world, and know what stuff men are made of. I will give you a lesson in human natur'. Suppose this young one was put out of the way, who'd be the next relation to her father?"

"William Denton, so far as I've heard," answered Pete.

"The old man's made heaps of money, you say, and it's like he's worn hisself out doin' it. S'pose now his darter would drop off, and then he'd drop off. Wouldn't this fellow step in for the cash?"

"Reckon so," said Pete.

"Bound to, Pete," continued the scout. "You can bet high that's what the chap's working for. He's got the right help, too, in Colonel Green. The hound's a deeper devil than any Sioux or Cheyenne on the plains. Now see here: they made a desperate effort, and fell through."

"Picayune Pete an' Nicodemus was around," muttered the boy.

"I'll go a buffalo that Colonel Green is with the train now. The two rascals have got their heads together. There ain't no Toledo here; it's easy to lose a little gal; and there's only the red Injuns to pick her up, if she'scapes the wolves."

"Dunno 'bout that," said the boy. "Picayune Pete and Nicodemus is around, besides I've got a pard that's wu'th three like me. I've got Bill Grub."

The scout laughed, then struck his hand in Pete's.

"I'm your hoss," he said. "I don't love the colonel."

For mile after mile the two comrades journeyed on, the strong, experienced scout, and the slight, earnest lad. For day after day they pursued their route through beautiful but monotonous scenery. Their nights were passed at the adobe dwellings of daring settlers—half fort, half habitation; or were spent in the mild air of the open prairie.

The valleys of the Big and Little Blue and of the Sandy were passed. The borders of Kansas were crossed and Nebraska entered. At length they entered the wide valley of the Platte, and the broad, shallow river, up which for many miles their route was to lay, was spread before them.

Pete was daily growing more versed in frontier life and border duty, by the interesting tales with which the scout beguiled the way, and the useful instruction which his experienced companions gave him.

They had now reached the buffalo country, and the northward trails of these giant animals were visible everywhere around them, but Pete strained his eager eyes in vain again t the horizon for a sight of one of these huge creatures. He was anxious to draw a bead on a larger game than he had yet essayed.

These glances at length brought him other objects than those he looked for. White, moving objects were visible against the horizon.

The mirage of the plains lifted them up and gave them the strangest shapes.

"There's water ahead there, sure enough," cried Pete. "It's a lake, or a sea: and ships on it, too."

"It's a dangerous lake for the man who is thirsty, and deceitful ships for the man who would sail," replied the scout. "That's the mirage, boy. I've seen it make the queerest things out of a sand-hill or buffalo, and miles of water out of a green level. It's very like to cheat young eyes, but I've been there too often. They are the canvas covers of Joe English's wagons. We'll fetch up with them before dark."

"And if I git Minnie Ellis under my eyes ag'in I'll bet two cows I'll flirg the kurnel, let alone the smooth devil that's backin' him up," cried Pete, joyfully.

The scout was right. The brisk-stepping horses soon brought the wagons into easy view. An hour before sundown the two travelers rode into the train.

This advent created a considerable confusion of a the long train, that seemed to stretch for a quarter-mile along the road.

It was an unexpected break in the monotony in long journey, and the teamsters crowded round the travelers, asking a hundred questions.

Many of them knew Bill Grubb, and greetings re-

sounded on all sides. Past the white-topped wagons, heavily laden with goods, and drawn each by a string of mules, Bill and the boy rode on.

Near the head of the train walked a stalwart roughly-dressed man, brandishing a long whip in his hand, while a brace of pistols in his belt proved him ready for more perilous work than driving mules.

"Joe English!" cried the scout, holding out his hand.

"Bill Grubb, or I'm a sinner!" roared the leader. "Where away, Bill? Jump off your horseflesh. Don't know anybody I keer to see more than you. We're going to camp in a mile more. You've got to spend the night with us."

"Can't say," replied Bill, as he sprung from his horse. "Friends of mine here that's looking for somebody in your train."

"Who? This pullet?" asked Joe, roughly. "What do you want, little one? Is it a man, woman or mule? Let's hear from you."

"It ain't neither," said Pete.

"What then? That's all we've got here."

"You're too rough-spoken, Joe. That's my friend, I told you. You ought to know what that means. It is a little gal he's after."

"Ain't got none," growled Joe.

"What!" cried Pete, with a sinking at the heart. "Don't want to say that you ain't got a little yaller-haired gal, that they call Minnie Ellis, with you?"

"Ain't got none," repeated Joe.

"Where is she, then?" asked Bill. "She left Independence in your train."

"You're right there, Bill," was the answer. "I'm bound for Santa Fe, you know. They were for California. There was ten two-hoss light wagons of them. My mules was a bit too slow, so they struck ahead on the trail. Lit out at daybreak this morning. Drove light. Reckon they're ten or fifteen mile ahead."

"And the yaller-hair with them?" asked Pete.

"Reckon so, if the Indians ain't gobbled them all."

"Who's with the California wagon?"

"Tom Wilson."

"Tom, eh? That's clever. He'll bring them through, or hurt himself trying. Guess we'll take supper and spend the night with you, Joe. Got to overhaul them wagons, though."

"What's up? Anything loose?"

"Don't know. Feard there mought be. Jump off, Pete. Our hosses are near fagged out. Give them a bite of buffalo-grass, and a night's sleep, and they are good for forty miles to-morrow."

Within an hour the wagons were drawn up in a circle, to serve as protection against a possible Indian attack, the stock turned out upon the succulent grass of the plains, and the men at their frugal supper.

We will not detail the camp-fire songs and stories that followed, and that kept off slumber till late in the night.

The next morning dawned bright and mild. The brisk, clear, soft atmosphere of the plains invigorated the travelers as much as their plentiful breakfast. With many a loud farewell to the train hands, they rode on, Nicodemus barking good-by to the canine acquaintances he had made during the night.

The freshened horses stepped out rapidly, and the slow train was ere long dropped below the horizon.

"There's buffalo," said Bill, pointing to the southward. It was now near noon.

A dozen dark forms were dimly visible against the horizon.

"By blue blazes!" cried Pete, rising in his saddle with enthusiasm. "Let's go for them!"

"We're on another lay now," said Bill, quietly. "If I ain't mistaken there will be wuss game than buffalo to shoot at before to-morrow."

"What do you mean?" asked Pete. "Nicodemus has got a new scent in his snout. Jist look at the dorg. What's afloat?"

"Injuns," was the sententious reply.

Pe'e was silent in the intensity of his emotions.

With eyes fixed on the ground he strove to read the signs by which his companions had traced the passage of the savage dwellers of the plains.

Nothing was visible to his eyes but the trail, with scant blades of grass between the wheel and hoof-marks. At one side the trail lay the skeleton of an ox. But everywhere along their journey such bleaching bones had been seen.

The scout looked keenly to see how Pete would take this startling announcement.

He was pleased with the earnest and fearless look of the boy, and the silent compression of his lips.

"Don't see it," was Pete's remark, at length.

"They crossed the trail," said Bill. "I saw the hoof-marks of their ponies, plain, back there. Ride a bit out to the left."

Pete obeyed. About a hundred yards out from the trail his eye caught that which sent the blood pulsing through his veins.

It was the tracks of a troop of unshod horses, faintly impressed upon the sandy soil.

"Here they go, due west," cried Pete.

"Plum after our California friends," replied Bill. "No use to follow their trail. We must let out on the emigrant track."

Rejoining him, Pete gave reins and heels to his horse, and the two strong animals moved on at a rattling pace.

With hardly a word they rode mile after mile and hour after hour. Noon had long passed, evening was approaching, yet the horizon ahead was still the same unbroken line.

"Fifteen or twenty miles' start ain't easy picked up," said Bill through his teeth. "The Injuns will strike for them to-night, and we must ride on till we fetch them."

The sun moved on to its setting, going down behind a long straight line several miles ahead.

"Water there," said Bill. "Trees don't grow here except along the stream."

The night had fallen, the twilight passed, when they reached the tree-lined stream. The moon was just tinging the east, but darkness yet lay on the plain.

The forest shed a dense gloom, into which they rode slowly.

"Steddy now and keerful, Pete," whispered Bill.

He had hardly spoken when a shrill yell broke on the air, seemingly a quarter-mile distant. It was followed by loud reports of fire-arms.

"Steddy, Pete," repeated Bill. "There's a desperate row ahead. The Injuns have broke in early. Fear of the moon, I judge."

Pete trembled with eagerness as he held in his horse at the whispered suggestions of his companion.

They moved forward slowly, soon crossing the shallow stream, and reaching the edge of the woodland.

The firing and shouting ahead redoubled. Cries of white men mingled with the Indian yells. Rifles cracked incessantly. The train had evidently escaped being surprised.

"We'd best make a break on them, Pete," said Bill. "They will think it's reinforcements. Injuns can't stand a surprise."

Twenty yards, slowly traversed, and the flashes of rifles became visible, lighting up the dark forms of the combatants.

Suddenly a shadowy object emerged from the darkness, rapidly approaching the wood. Behind it moved a second, which a rifle-flash revealed as an Indian, with upraised hatchet.

The same flash enabled Pete to take quick aim with his pistol. A sharp report followed, and the arm of the savage fell dangling to his side.

The form in advance dropped something which it held, and sprung for the shadows of the trees.

Bill urged his horse at full speed upon the wounded savage, and Pete was about to follow when he saw the dog run up to the fallen object, and caper round it, with a glad bark.

A faint cry, in a familiar childish voice, met his ear at the same instant.

Pete fell, rather than sprung from his horse, and just as the heavy horse of Bill Grubb rode down the savage, he lifted in his arms the fallen object, around which Nicodemus was still capering.

It was, indeed, a human form, and as he raised it from the ground, a flash lit up the well-remembered face of Minnie Ellis, her eyes looking into his with a glad cry of recognition, her arms meeting with a choking clasp around his neck.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO AGAINST A DOZEN.

PETE's surprise and gladness were mingled with consternation and the dangerous position in which his protegee was placed.

"Pete!" she said, in a half whisper. "Picayune Pete! I thought you were in Toledo."

"I came here after you, Minnie," was his answer. "I wasn't a-goin' to trust my little Minnie among the Injuns."

The child, in the exuberance of her gratitude, again clasped her arms around Pete's neck, and kissed him. The warm pressure of her lips called up a flush such as the boy's cheek, hardened by a rude life, had seldom known.

All this had passed in less than a minute, thought and feeling moving with lightning speed through their minds in that perilous moment.

"To your horse, Pete!" cried the firm tones of Bill Grubb. "I'm afeard the devils will take the alarm. Who have you got there?"

"Minnie Ellis."

"The blazes you have! Well, that's a queer go. Here they come, lad! Up with you like a feather. Fling me the gal."

But Pete, disobeying this request, lifted Minnie to his own saddle, and sprung up after her.

"The two of us won't weigh as much as you," he said, as he grasped the reins. "Hang on to me, tight, Minnie. We're going to ride hard."

"This way, Pete! There comes a dozen of the red villains! Let out, boy! let out! Dig in your heels, Pete! Can't loaf now."

Dark as it had been a few minutes before, the moon had now risen sufficiently to faintly illuminate objects. A dark, shadowy mass had left the scene of the conflict, and was rapidly approaching. The thud of horses' hoofs on the yielding soil was plainly audible.

But Pete and Bill were now in full flight, Minnie clinging with a firm clasp to the boy's waist.

Their horses had been ridden long and hard that day, but they had wind and muscle yet for a short burst, and they sped at a rattling pace over the level soil of the plain.

The pursuing savages broke into a yell on seeing the flight of their foes. They goaded their ponies on with arrow-points in pursuit.

"Ah, burst your copper-lined throats, blast you!" cried the scout. "There's a dozen to two, or there wouldn't be no fight in you. Let out, Pete! It's getting kind of risky."

They were riding parallel to the line of timber, about fifty yards distant. The pursuers were somewhat nearer the woodland, and seemed trying to head the fugitives from this refuge.

In that perilous moment the horses of Bill Grubb showed their mettle. Worn out as they were they ran as if fresh from a night's rest.

Slowly but surely they forged ahead of their pursuers. Foot by foot the wood was neared. For ten minutes the stirring chase continued. At the end of that time the horses of the fugitives were within ten feet of the timber, and fifty yards in advance of their pursuers.

The wagon-train was left from two to three miles behind them.

With a shout of derision Bill rose in his saddle, and waved his hand to the savages.

"Come on, you copper-colored devils!" he shout-

ed. "Come on, my handsome neighbors! Come on, sweethearts! Speak, why don't you, you devil's imps!"

Pete added his shrill tones of derision to the voice of the scout. He could feel Minnie trembling as she clasped him with nervous force.

"Keep up your spirits, gal," he whispered. "Bill and me ain't afeard of 'em."

These insulting cries were answered by the savages with a fierce peal of yells. A rifle-ball whistled past Bill's ear. They were not armed alone with arrows.

"Strike in, Pete! Strike in!" cried the scout. "They're sending lead after us. Never saw Injuns shoot so close on horseback. Head in!"

A leap or two more of the exhausted horses, and the dark line of the timber was entered. The low brush cracked under their iron hoofs. Tall trees shot past them.

They rode for twenty paces under the dark umbrous arches.

"Halt!" was Bill's next command. "To the ground, Pete. The hosses are played. Leave the gal here. Fetch your shooting-iron. We've got to tree and have a little confab with these gentlemen."

This order was obeyed as soon as given. The scout led the way to the edge of the timber, and hid his muscular frame behind a huge cottonwood tree. Pete lost no time in following his example.

It was scarcely a minute since they had entered the timber.

Their pursuers came to a halt just outside their position. The moon had now got clear of the horizon, and threw a faint light through the trees upon the cluster of savages. Its full light struck the plain some distance beyond.

"Draw a bead on them, Pete," whispered Bill, excitedly. "Take that tall fellow with the feather. I've got my map."

Every nerve in the boy's body thrilled and quivered as he raised his rifle, and felt, for the first time, that the life of a man lay in his hands.

A sudden trembling took him, and he lowered the death-dealing weapon. For the moment he dared not shoot.

The sharp crack of the scout's rifle roused him. What would Bill Grubb think of such childishness was now the only thought in his mind.

There was the scream of a wounded or slain savage. For an instant the remainder huddled together like a flock of startled birds.

The sudden stillness was broken by the clear report of Pete's rifle. The boy's nerves now were steel, his muscles iron. The tall savage with the eagle's feather reeled and fell headlong from his saddle. A cry broke from a comrade behind him. The ball, at that short range had passed through the body of the first, and broken the arm of a second.

Pete's first shot had done fearful execution upon his savage foes.

"Good for you, lad. I knowed you was the making of a hoss!" cried Bill, approvingly. "Use your pistol, boy. Make them think there's a dozen of us."

The savages had broken at this second shot, and were riding in every direction from that dangerous locality.

Pete still held the five bullets in his revolver, and he fired three of these in quick succession at the flying savages.

One horse tottered and fell to the ground, flinging his rider before him. The pistol-bullet had no further effect unless to increase the speed of the Indians.

Several of the savage foe had made for the cover of the woods, and were now treed like their antagonists, seeking for a chance to retrieve their losses.

It was a dangerous situation for the two bold whites. The darkness under the cover of the woods was their last protection. The Indians would be very heedful of their advances.

"Load, Pete," whispered the scout at his side, as

he rammed home his own bullet. "Load every barrel. An extra shot might be worth a gold-mine now."

Pete hastened to obey. His native coolness had fully returned to him. Although his heart throbbed with the excitement of his new position, every trace of nervousness had left him, and he loaded his weapons with the steady hand of a veteran.

He was by nature bold and daring, and there was no apprehension in his young heart as he awaited the onset of the foe.

But the thought of Minnie came to him, with a thrill of dread.

"Think the gal's safe, Bill?" he asked, nervously. "Wouldn't have nothin' happen to her, nohow. Kind of feared the red-skins mought creep round there."

"They know where we are, Pete. The hosses are too deep in the woods. They won't be troubled. Ain't got no sort of fear for the gal."

Their conversation was interrupted by the report of a rifle. One of the savages had crept near them in the darkness, and had fired in the direction of their voices.

Minute followed minute. Faint sounds could be heard in the wood as if persons or animals were moving through it. The savages who had ridden out to the plain had disappeared from sight. How many of them had taken to the shelter of the trees could not be told.

Pete felt something rubbing against his legs, and looked down in startled surprise.

His eyes caught the small form of Nicodemus, whom, for some time, he had lost sight of.

The dog ran out toward the center of the woods, and then returned to him, as if asking him to follow.

Ere Pete could imagine what this movement meant, new reports of rifles were heard. Shots from two different directions passed them. They were surrounded by their foes.

"Skin me, Pete, but this looks squally," whispered Bill. "Let's snake back into the woods a bit."

With a half-creeping, half-gliding motion, they slipped back from tree to tree, avoiding noise and exposure to the moonlight as much as possible.

Nicodemus seemed overjoyed by this movement, and ran gladly before them.

"Here's the hosses, Pete," whispered the scout.

"Ther's only one hoss," answered Pete, springing forward, with little regard to caution. And the gal's gone! Minnie's gone! Do you know what's up, Nick?" he asked the excited dog.

The intelligent animal replied by running toward the eastern border of the wood. Pete followed, with leveled rifle.

At the same moment a loud uproar was heard in the plain to the west. Shouts, rifle-shots, and the noise of a throng of flying horses, broke on the still night air.

CHAPTER XIV.

A BRAVE BOY'S FEAT.

THE scout, leaving his young companion to proceed alone, listened eagerly to the sounds from the open plain. These were not Indian yells he heard, but the ringing cheers of white men.

There was a rushing sound as if a throng of horsemen was driving past at utmost speed. Incessant reports of rifles and revolvers rent the air. The triumphant shouts proclaimed victory for the whites.

"Lay on, lads! Lay on!" cried a loud voice, audible above all the noise. "Give it to them! Don't let a hoof or scalp-lock escape! Bury the lead in their bloody hides!"

The emigrants had evidently driven off their foes, and a mounted party was fiercely pursuing them.

Bill Grubb, with an answering shout, rushed back to the edge of the wood. Out upon the plain he could see the foe in full flight, followed by a dozen whites, who loaded and fired as they rode.

Every shot from those trained borderers killed or

wounded its man. The Indians fled as if possessed with a panic.

Those who had been besieging himself and Pete in the wood had taken the alarm, and were now riding rapidly in the shadow of the trees, several of them just opposite his position.

A shot from the scout's rifle emptied the saddle of the hindmost of these.

With a loud shout of triumph he sprung for the bewildered horse, which had stopped by the body of his slain rider.

In an instant he was mounted and urging the animal on with hand and heel, loading his rifle as he rode like a whirlwind in the wake of the flying savages.

"Pile it into them!" he shouted to his friends at a distance. "The 'tarnal, copper-colored prairie rats! give them no quarter. Shoot them like you would wolves or grizzlies!"

The pursuing whites answered the voice of this unknown but welcome ally with redoubled cheers. The pursuit continued at a furious pace over the plain, the ponies of the Indians gradually gaining upon the heavy-limbed draught horses of their antagonists.

All thought of his young companion had vanished from the scout's mind in the excitement of the chase. More than one savage bit the dust, from his unerring rifle, as he continued to load and fire.

Mounted on one of the swiftest of the Indian ponies, he had drawn ahead of the other pursuers, and was riding almost alone, in the rear of the savages.

"Halt!" was the cry that broke from the midst of the emigrant party. "They're out of our reach. If we follow too far they may gain heart and double on us. Best scud back to the wagons."

Bill heard this recall, but he rammed his bullet home, and drew a bead on another of the fugitives before turning.

"Don't be afraid of them!" he cried, as he wheeled his horse around and rode for the halted party. "They won't draw rein for the next five miles. They're wuss skeered than a pack of antelopes. Blame their ugly picters, they've got a settler."

He rode up to the small troop, who were halted in the clear moonlight, looking toward him with curious interest.

"Tom Wilson among you?" he asked.

"Yes," answered a stalwart man, riding out to meet him. "I'm that critter. Close up, and let's see your phiz. Ought to know that voice."

"Guess you know me, Tom," said the scout, riding up with outstretched hand.

"Bill Grubb, or I'm a catamount!" roared Tom, grasping the hand of the scout with a clutch that would have broken the bones of delicate fingers. "What the thunder brings you here in the nick of time? You're always turning up just when you're wanted, Bill."

"Bet I am," said Bill, releasing his hand. "Know it's Tom Wilson now, if I didn't before. It's only one man that's got them cast-iron fingers."

"This is Bill Grubb, gentlemen," said Tom. "He's a hoss. Guess you've heerd of him if you ever set foot on the plains afore. Where away, old crony?"

"I'm at home now, Tom. I was after you fellows."

"Not on foot, I reckon? That's an Injun critter you've got there."

"No. Left my horse in the timber. And a sharp little monkey of a boy with him. 'Ey Jehosaphat, I forgot all about Pete. Had one of your train youngsters in tow. A little gal called Minnie Ellis."

"Minnie Ellis?" said Tom, in wonder.

"Yes. We left her with the bosses. 'Spect some of the copper devils snatched her. Maybe they've gobblled the plucky little rascal too. This way, Tom; we must see what's goin' on."

"Minnie Ellis is in a wagon in the train," said a young man, riding forward.

It was her cousin, William Denton,

"The blazes she is!" said Bill, looking keenly in his face. "Then my eyes ain't worth shucks, for I see'd her not twenty minutes ago."

"You must be mistaken," said another person, a tall, heavily-bearded man. "I saw the child while the fight was going on. She was peering out of the wagon, and I warned her to keep inside."

"And I tell you then that there's some confounded deviltry at work in your camp. Some rascal cut through the Injun lines with her, and dropped her on the edge of the timber. He'd gone under only for Pete and me."

"I saw the fellow break through, and felt like dropping a bullet after him. Had something in his arms, but I did not see what."

This was spoken by a person further back in the throng.

"Blasted queer!" growled Tom Wilson. "Did you know the chap?"

"No. He shot through like a streak."

"This way, Tom," said Bill, heading his horse for the wood. "The boy's game, but he might want some help."

"Make back for the camp, boys," said Tom. "You mought be wanted there. Reckon we'll be on your trail in a whiff."

The two scouts were soon buried in the timber, the crackling of bushes marking their progress.

The others turned and rode back toward the camp.

But we must return to Pete, whom we left just starting in search of Minnie.

Nicodemus still led the way with his nose to the ground. He seemed tracking some one by scent. Pete had such confidence in the ability of his dog that he felt sure that he was on Minnie's track.

He was not a minute in crossing the almost dry bed of the stream, and reaching the further edge of the timber.

The dog's trained senses were no longer needed. There, at no great distance in the moonlit plain, was the horse he had himself ridden, its saddle now occupied by an Indian warrior. Minnie was not visible, but what seemed the skirt of a child's dress showed by the side of a warrior.

A faint cry came like the blast of a trumpet to Pete's ears. He knew those accents well, and rushed across the plain with a speed that had often excited the envy of the boys of Toledo.

The worn-out horse which the Indian rode was not able to distance this rapid speed of his pursuer.

Nicodemus had shot like a comet across the plain, and was already in front of the horse, barking loudly, and distracting the movements of the animal.

The Indian fixed an arrow to the string of his bow, and shot at the leaping dog. But Nicodemus only darted and barked the more fiercely after this murderous assault.

Pete had raised his rifle, and lowered it again for fear of wounding Minnie. Now he dared not fire. He ran, however, with undiminished speed, gaining somewhat on the fugitive.

A yell of defiance broke from the lips of the latter. He goaded the horse on with the keen point of an arrow.

Nicodemus, at the same moment, made a more vigorous assault upon the animal. The exhausted steed, confused by these conflicting causes, stumbled and fell sideways to the plain, flinging his rider with a hard shock to the ground.

Minnie was saved from hurt by falling on the body of the prostrate savage.

In an instant the latter was on his feet, knife in hand, and the glare of a demon in his eyes.

He caught the child by the long, yellow hair, waved the keen blade significantly round her head, and glanced at Pete with an insulting laugh.

His savage soul was doubtless amused on seeing that his bold pursuer was but a half-grown boy.

Minnie's eyes were turned upon Pete with a look of appealing terror, which he could recognize even at that distance.

Yet nothing could have saved the child from the bloodthirsty intentions of the savage, but for the aid of an unthought-of ally.

As he raised his weapon for the third time, with deadly meaning in his eyes, Nicodemus buried his sharp teeth in the leg of the warrior.

With a cry of pain the latter turned fiercely round.

That moment was his last. The savage had not fairly turned ere a rifle bullet crashed through his brain. He fell headlong to the ground, a dead man.

"Saved again, Minnie!" cried Pete, joyfully.

"That Injun won't go for no gal's hair ag'in, I bet."

The child was in an instant beside her deliverer, her arms clasped round him.

"Oh, Pete!" she cried, lifting her eyes, yet full of terror, to his. "Oh, that was dreadful! You must never leave me again, Pete. He would have killed me only for you, my dear, good Pete!"

A strong shudder shook her frame as her arms twined firmly about him.

CHAPTER XV.

A TRAITOR IN THE CAMP.

THE fallen horse lost no time in scrambling again to his feet and stood in a drooping attitude beside the dead body of the red-skin who so lately had ridden him.

Not so Nicodemus. He seemed to fully comprehend and to be overjoyed at the rescue, and frisked about Pete and Minnie as if asking that he might be allowed to share in their happiness.

"A jolly old dorg you are, Nick, I'll say that much for you," said Pete, encouragingly. "Just think, Minnie. The cute old feller trailed you from the woods, and led me straight as a die on the Injun's track. Ain't many dorgs like him; and I know what a dorg is 'bout as well as the next boy."

"Good Nicodemus," said Minnie, throwing her arms round the dog's neck, a liberty he was not usually inclined to submit to. "You're a dear, good creature, just like your master."

"Now, now, gal, none of that," said Pete, half offended. "Don't like no soft soap of that kind. We've got no time for such talk. But make tracks for timber."

They proceeded slowly toward the woods, the horse following.

They had nearly reached the line of trees when the sound of trampling hoofs admonished them of possible peril.

Pulling Minnie quickly after him, Pete sprung behind a tree, instinctively raising his rifle. It was empty! He had neglected to reload after shooting the Indian.

A pang of remorse at a negligence which might prove fatal affected him. He drew his pistol, and prepared to sell his life dearly. Minnie crouched on the ground beside him.

The horsemen broke from the timber just before him.

"There's my hoss, sure enough. But where's Pete?" cried a well-known voice.

"Somebody's left his mark here. There's dead Injun," said another.

"Who is it?" whispered Minnie. "Those are not Indians."

"Here I am, Bill," said Pete, springing out into the open space. "Alive and kickin' yit, and good for a baker's dozen of the red rascals. And here's Nicodemus. Reckon you've seen that dorg afore. If he ain't showed his fetchin'-up to-night I'll cave. And last and best, here's the gal, Minnie Ellis. Said I'd go for her, and Pete don't brag. It's my hand-writin' on that Injun."

"If you don't brag, you blow, and that's about as bad," growled the coarse voice of Tom Wilson. "You've 'arn't the right, though, so blow away, my spruce youngster. That's the child, sure enough. I'd give a cow to know who stole her out of camp."

"Maybe she can tell you herself," said Bill.

"I did not see his face," spoke the musical voice of Minnie. "He did not speak."

"There's a traitor in the camp, sure as shooting," cried Tom. "But we'll rake him up and scorch him. Come, boy, jump on your hoss, and take the gal with you. We must be making back tracks for camp."

Pete needed no second order. He was soon mounted, with Minnie clasping his waist from behind.

The horses were turned and again entered the timber, the scout securing his own horse as they passed through.

The few miles which separated them from the camp were soon passed over, and they drove in behind the intrenchment of wagons, which had so well served the emigrants.

The remainder of the party were already there, and the return of the scouts was hailed with cheers.

There were several women and children in the wagons, by whom the return of Minnie was warmly welcomed. They were disposed to lionize Pete, after the story of the rescue had been told; a feeling which was shared by many of the men.

But the boy was in no mood for fooling, as he called it, and soon crept out of sight in the bottom of a wagon, and was lost in slumber.

It was not long before the whole camp was indulging in that sleep from which the Indian raid had, so far, hindered them.

The horses were left to crop the thin grass outside the wagons, no fear being now felt of a return of the savages. Two or three sentinels were posted, however, as a safeguard against possible danger.

The scouts, Bill and Tom, remained for an hour in close conversation, before they sought the much-needed slumber in which their weary brethren were indulging.

"We've got to keep our eyes skinned," was Tom's concluding remark. "He was a risky critter, that's sartain, to run, afoot, through a line of mounted Ingines. He either didn't know the danger, or else there's a spice of the devil in him. There was a feller seen to come back into the camp from the timber, jist as we were taking to hourse to chase the redskins. Everybody was too busy then to take notice of him."

"A traitor in the camp is a mighty bad bizness," replied Bill. "He's got to be treed, that's all. Right sure it wasn't that relation of the gal's?"

"Yes. I know it wasn't."

"Then I'll go my rifle on it that Colonel Green is among you. He's as cute as a fox, and he's got as many faces as a looking-glass. I don't owe him no good will, and I'm going to lay low for him. Don't calculate he'll shet my eye up long."

The next morning dawned bright. There had been no new alarm during the night, and the plain now, as far as eye could reach, was clear of Indian sign.

While the women prepared a hasty breakfast, the men were engaged in harnessing the horses and getting ready for a start.

The party consisted of twenty-five men and five women, besides several children. Some of the men had received wounds in the fight, but only two were hurt seriously enough to disable them from walking.

These had beds arranged for them in the wagons, and the sun was not an hour high ere the train was again in motion.

"Guess the bloody Cheyennes will let us alone to-day," said Tom, as his keen glance scanned the horizon. "Ain't a feather or scalp-lock inside of five miles."

"There's worse danger inside than outside the train," was Bill's remark, as he left his friend, and proceeded slowly through the line of wagons.

Every member of the expedition was successively examined by his keen glance. Half the day was occupied in this duty.

"Can't make it out," he said to Tom, "If the

colonel's here, he's a huckleberry above me. Who are them hurt men? Didn't see them."

"They're safe enough. One of them's Joe Prime, who I've knowed for years. T'other's that red-whiskered feller you saw in the fight last night. Him that said he saw the gal peeping out of the wagon. He's sound, too."

"Then I'm dished, so far—that's all," said Bill.

Pete, meanwhile, was occupying himself in a similar investigation, and with equally poor success.

He spent much time in conversation with Minnie, whose penchant for him continued in full force.

Pete was thoroughly happy, and enjoyed the expedition with the keenest zest.

The boy watched William Denton closely, and was rewarded, one evening, by seeing him approach a wagon that contained one of the wounded men.

It was not a minute before Pete's hands and knees had placed him under the wagon.

"It's twice dropped through," he heard Denton say, in whispered tones, "thanks to that cursed boy. Don't let the third time fail."

"Not if it's in the wood," came a low voice from the wagon.

Pete crouched lower, and listened intently.

The two men, however, lowered their voices, as if in dread they had been speaking too loud, and for several minutes he failed to catch a word.

He heard occasional portions of what followed, but was able to make very little sense of it.

"Not safe this side of the mountains," was one partial phrase.

"The Utes will do," followed shortly after.

"That arm near well?" asked Denton in a mocking tone.

"Could sling a fifty-six-pounder with it," was the answer.

These were the only coherent sentences he could comprehend, out of the whispered conversation. Denton moved off after a few minutes, as if not caring to be observed in that locality. Pete, too, crept from his hiding-place, and strolled slowly through the camp, much pondering.

"Who's the feller in the wagon?" he said to himself; "that's the next question. He's playin' possum, that's sartain. I've treed some mighty black biz'ness, if I ain't, sell me. Bet I keep half an eye on that 'coon."

"What's broke, Pete?" asked the cheerful voice of Bill Grubb. "You look as melancholy as a two-hour-old kitten. Ain't got sick of emigration, hey; and wishing you was back again in the States?"

"What's a Ute?" was Pete's answer.

"A what?" asked Bill. "A Ute Injun, do you mean?"

"Dunno," said Pete. "Spect it mought be that. Jist wanted to know. Where does these Injuns keep house?"

"Far enough west yet. About Brigham's headquarters. Mostly in Utah."

"T'other side the mountings?"

"Sartainly. Nobody ever heerd of a Ute anywhere else. What about them?"

"Think I've treed jist the biggest 'coon you ever seen." was Pete's reply. "Been prospectin' a bit."

"What is it?" asked the scout, curiously. "Out with it."

Pete, thus requested, drew his companion out of ear-shot of the others, and proceeded to tell him what he had heard.

The scout listened attentively, seeming to think Pete's discovery a very important one.

"There's a mouse hid somewhere," he said, reflectively. "Have you seen the chap that's in the wagon?"

"No. Reckon I will, though, afore he's much older."

"Keep your eye skinned, Pete. They're on the watch for you, and wouldn't stop long to give you a settler. Got your pistol ready?"

"Ain't never without it."

"Don't let this man see you watching. He calcu-

lates he's shut our eyes up, and let him keep thinking so. Wouldn't wonder if it was Colonel Green himself. Just like his tricks. Think I'll interview Tom Wilson."

While the scout proceeded to seek the guide of the expedition, Pete continued the conversation with his dog, who was now frisking about his legs, as if anxious for a caress.

"Git out, Nicodemus!" said Pete, with dignity. "Ain't got no time now to waste on dogs. You're not bad on 'coon and rabbit, Nick, but we ain't on that biz'ness now. Trailing Injuns and girl-thieves and that sort of thing ain't your trade. Best make yourself scarce, Nick. Don't want no interfering with my reflections."

Having got off this grandiloquent phrase for him, Pete walked away in a very dignified manner. There was a mystery extant, and Pete felt his importance as chief detective too much to associate with Nicodemus. Dogs might do for the ordinary affairs of life, but matters like this were above the range of their genius.

CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT NAPPING AT LAST.

For days and weeks they toiled on through the mountain region. The wagons were light, and not heavily freighted, with four good animals in each. They made rapid time, therefore, passing numerous heavier trains on the road.

Yet the distance was so great, and the road so difficult, that it seemed as if the days would stretch into months, and the snows of winter be upon them before they could reach the milder climate of the Pacific slope.

The weather so far had kept unusually mild, and our two young friends enjoyed the journey with that zest which only youth can feel.

Pete and Minnie became almost inseparable companions, wearing away the long days with childish conversation, and growing strong and rugged by long walks in the clear mountain air.

Pete, much as he had learned to enjoy Minnie's society, did not forget the claims of Bill Grubb upon him. The veteran scout had taken a strong fancy to the boy and did his utmost to instruct him in the details of border life.

Under this skilled instructor, Pete rapidly improved. He had already not only brought down his buffalo with a rifle-ball, but had injured a grizzly bear so badly that the animal fell dead after a mile's chase of the daring boy.

After this exploit Pete became a hero of the camp and wore a necklace of the grizzly's claws with as much pride as a mountain Indian wears a similar trophy.

Colorado was safely crossed and the barren soil of northern Utah lay behind them, and yet no further attempt had been made against Minnie Ellis. It seemed as if the villains had given up their schemes, when weeks passed on without the least evidence of any hostile plans.

Pete's vigilance was somewhat weakened by this long immunity, and he even began to imagine that he might have wronged Bricktop—as he persisted in calling the red-haired man he believed to be Colonel Green.

Joe Prime, as this man called himself, bore every evidence of being a quiet, honest emigrant, and if he was disguised, as Pete imagined, the disguise was certainly perfect, extending to his manner and speech, as well as to his dress.

They had now entered the region occupied by the Ute Indians, and Pete's doubts were revived as he saw, every few days of their journey, members of this treacherous tribe. He had not forgotten the words he had heard in the wagon, nor did he fail to notice new signs of understanding between Bricktop and William Denton.

Utah was passed and Nevada entered. The end of

their journey now began to loom up before them, and the spirits of the wearied emigrants were lifted within them into pleasant expectation.

Yet many weary miles still had to be traversed, and the whole rugged width of Nevada to be crossed.

For miles and miles their route lay along the valley of the Humboldt river, the only green pass through a barren desert. Through wild canyons in the mountains they wended their slow way, having occasionally to leave the line of the stream, and seek some more accessible cleft through the endless rocky ranges.

Humboldt canyon was passed in this way, and the train emerged on the western side of the range, at a point known as Gravelly Ford.

Here was the only spot of luxuriant verdure which their eyes had looked upon for weeks, and, as was the custom with emigrants, they concluded to halt here for a few days to rest and refit after their weary journey.

But they had not yet left the realm of hostile Indians. The Shoshones dwelt in this region, and often proved themselves dangerous neighbors. It was deemed advisable, therefore, to post sentinels during the night to guard against a possible assault from the savages.

This duty was delegated to one after another in the train, there being several reliefs made during the night, so as to avoid any danger of the sentinels being overcome with sleep.

"This is your night on, Bill," said Pete, on the last night of their projected stay.

"Yes, I take the first watch."

"I'll have a good nap then. Keep a sharp eye on Bricktop, and all other dangerous critters, and stir me up when you're ready to go to roost. Kind of doubtful of that critter yit."

"This is not the ground for him, so don't get skeered," said the scout. "He'd be scooped up by the Shoshones afore he went far; and I guess he's got sense enough to know it."

When Bill's watch was over he was too sleepy and too unsuspicious of danger to obey Pete's request.

They both slept soundly till morning.

The sun was not well up before the camp was astir, and the busy wagoners preparing to renew the journey.

Pete took his usual morning stroll through the camp. As he approached the wagon in which Minnie slept he looked eagerly for her bright face, which usually beamed upon him from the opening curtains of the wagon.

This morning she was not visible.

"Rouse up there, Minnie," cried Pete, cheerfully. "The sun's an hour high."

No answer came from the wagon.

"Come, Minnie," he repeated. "Breakfast is on the table, and your coffee gettin' cold. Time all travelers was up."

"She is not here," replied a woman from the wagon. "She must have been up before day."

"Sure of that?" asked Pete, in a tone of alarm. "She is not in the camp."

"She must be wandering outside, then. She is not here."

Pete darted off hastily, and in five minutes had traversed the entire locality. No trace of the child was visible, either in or within sight of the camp.

The frightened boy questioned every one in quick accents. No one had seen her since the previous evening.

The alarm rapidly became general. A thorough search of the camp was instituted.

"Who had the morning watch?" asked Bill Grubb, anxiously.

"Joe Prime," said Wilson.

"The blazes he had! And where is he? Where is Bricktop?" asked Pete, angrily.

All eyes looked hastily round. He, too, was not to be seen.

"I'll be fiddled if the devil that stole the gal afor-

ain't stole her ag'in," cried Pete. "And if I ain't goin' for him with a hot foot, you can sell me out, that's all."

"Is there not some mistake, some unexplained error?" cried William Denton, with an air of great agitation. "It cannot be—my cousin, an innocent young child—who could wish to injure her?"

"Anybody who wanted her out of the way," said Bill Grubb, curtly. "It ain't because she's half a baby, but because some critters are blamed rascals, that the gal's missing."

"This man could have no object in injuring her," continued Denton. "He never saw her before he joined the train. She must be somewhere about the camp. We have not searched fully."

"You kin hunt till you're blind, and you won't see nothin' before then nor after then," replied Pete. "That chap stole her, and there ain't no use talkin'."

"I'll be shot if the fellow ain't kidnapped my horse, as well as the gal," said Bill Grubb, who had hastily left the group a few minutes before. "He's the best animal in the train, and we'll have to ride like blazes to catch him."

"To horse, then!" cried Tom Wilson. "We'll ride him down if there's any luck for the right side."

"And hang him like a thief, if there's a tree ten foot high this side of the hills," said the scout.

"Unhitch, lads," cried Wilson. "You'll have to spend a day or two more here. Half a dozen will be enough with us. The rest of you can guard the train. Look out sharp for Shoshones."

While some of the party occupied themselves in preparing their best horses for a hard ride, Bill Grubb had walked out some distance beyond the camp to look for the trail. He had no difficulty in finding it. There were the marks of horses' feet, implanted so plainly in the soil that a child could have followed them.

"My own hoss, too," he growled. "I'd know it in a thousand. And stepping out like thunder. We'll have to be hard on hossflesh, lads."

There were eight horsemen in the party that in ten minutes was mounted and ready for the road.

This consisted of Bill Grubb, Picayune Pete, Tom Wilson, and William Denton, with four of the emigrants who were well versed in the perils of frontier life.

Down the rocky valley, into which the trail led, they rode at headlong speed, in a few minutes shutting out the train from sight, as the roadway curved.

The valley was here covered with a thin soil; here the bare rock emerged. Only at intervals was the earth deep enough to return the impress of hoofs. But in all these places the tracks of the fugitive's horse were plainly visible.

"Never mind the trail," cried Tom Wilson, as he dug his heels into his horse's sides. "The feller's in a cup here, and he can't ride over its edges. I've got his path for the next ten miles laid out like a map in my eye. Make your critters git up and git. He's got an hour or two the start."

Down the valley still they went, mile after mile. A new feeling had risen in Pete's mind, a thirst for revenge, which he had never felt before. His lips were closely set, his face pale and eager. His fierce impulse seemed to have communicated itself to his horse, who had kept at the head of the small cavalcade. At his heels ran Nicodemus, who was not to be distanced by any common horse.

Between two sloping ridges their road lay, running in a southwestwardly direction. It was a waterless, barren region, utterly incapable of supporting life, though roamed over by wandering Indians. They would need to ride twenty miles in this direction to find water.

Few words were spoken, as they rode on with stern faces and keen eyes. The hard soil, over which they now passed, retained no mark of hoofs, no indication of the passage of man or beast.

Yet no other avenue could have been taken through

the mountain-girdled region, and they thundered on with unshaken confidence.

"Here it is ag'in," cried Bill Grubb, as they entered a patch of low sage brush, which had been broken down as by some heavy tread.

"Let out, lads! Let out!" yelled Tom Wilson. "Can't see the critter, yet, but if he ain't rid like lightning, we can twig him at the next bend."

The bend was reached. Before them lay a long, clean valley, several miles in extent, sloping up to the mountain ranges on each side.

The trained eyes of the scout read every indication of this long avenue. They were doomed to disappointment. Not a sign of life could be seen upon its broad extent! It lay in utter barrenness under the rays of the morning sun.

"Nothing alive, neither wolf, grizzly, Injun or hoss," said the scout. "The fellow has rid hard, that's sure. He couldn't turn on us anyhow. And here goes the trail."

"I'll fetch him if I ride ten years straight on this line," said Pete, between his teeth. "The red-whiskered devil, if I don't prove sudden death to him it's a caution. Let out, fellers. I'm tired of creepin'. The hound can't be many miles ahea'!"

For five miles further they continued without drawing rein, scarcely speaking. Every step of the journey but added to their excitement of feeling, and stern determination to deal hardly with the culprit, should he be overtaken.

But now the landscape before them changed. The single, wide valley contracte¹, and seemed to divide into several passes, some running straight forward, others apparently cutting through the mountain ranges.

It became doubtful what direction it was best to take. The stony passes were almost destitute of soil, and no trace of the trail was visible.

"Straight on by this pass, I say," remarked Tom Wilson. "It turns west ten miles on, and opens into a decenter country than this. Not much troubled with Injuns either."

"But this chap ain't Tom Wilson, and hasn't been brung up in this country," said the scout. "He dunno which is the best pass, and would be likely to strike west."

"He might if he wanted to fall into the hands of his pursuers," said William Denton. "It is my opinion that he has chosen the least likely pass, with the hope to throw us off the track."

"The ground ain't all as hard-hearted as this," said Pete. "There's bits of soil and brush here and there. Reckon it's best for us to split and hunt the trail. Mought tumble over it somewhere hereabout."

"That's my idea," said the scout. "No use going on without we know what we're about."

"All right," said Wilson. "I'll try the onward route."

The party forthwith divided, two or three of them accompanying Tom Wilson, while the others searched the other routes.

Pete struck into a narrow track running west. It was a rocky, broken pass, almost too narrow for the passage of a horse.

Nicodemus followed him, not quite so alertly as he had moved on their starting out. The ten miles journey had taken some of the life out of the dog.

The boy moved cautiously on, using his eyes heedfully, not only for marks of the trail, but for possible Indian foemen who might be in the pass before him.

The narrow pass wound up into the hills; opening out wider as he proceeded. Pete seemed utterly alone, deep silence and solitude surrounding him.

Bold of heart as the boy was, this removal from the whole human world, as it seemed, told upon his nerves. He looked forward at each successive turn with a half-fearful glance. Nicodemus drew close up, with a drooping tendency in his tail.

Pete was inclined to give up the bootless search and turn back, when a faint indication in the sand attracted his attention.

It was too slight to see from horseback, and he sprung to the ground to examine it more closely.

He stooped with eager gaze over the faint indentation, a sense of triumph growing in his mind.

There it was, plain enough, the undeniable impress of a horse's hoof, and undoubtedly that of Bill Grubb's horse. There was a peculiar shape of this hoof-mark which the boy had not failed to notice.

He arose and stood erect a moment, looking down the valley. There was a slight sound behind him. He turned hastily to look back, when the report of a rifle rung through the narrow pass, a severe blow seemed to fall upon his head, and he dropped insensible to the ground.

His horse, alarmed by the sound, sprung over him, and ran forward into the pass.

Nicodemus, on the contrary, ran backward, fiercely barking, and with evident intention to attack the assailant of his master.

There was a momentary thunder of horses' hoofs down the rocky pass, then silence settled upon the scene, Nicodemus returning from his futile assault to lick the pallid face of his master, and to awake the echoes of the lonely place by a dog's grievous howl.

Pete lay unmoved by the animal's obtrusive grief. The hue of death was upon his face. Death seemed to brood over the whole barren valley.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE HOT TRAIL.

BILL GRUBB soon found the pass he had entered to be unfruitful of results. It was the dry bed of a mountain stream, and contracted, after a mile's devious wandering, into an impassable crevice.

He turned and rode back to the main valley. The pass had been difficult of ascent, and some time had been wasted in this exploration.

His friends were not within view. Riding to the head of the direct pass, which Tom Wilson had chosen, he saw them nearly a mile in advance, moving slowly down the valley.

A hand was waved to him from the party, and they rode on more rapidly.

"Tom has struck the trail," said the scout, as he turned his horse down the pass. "He don't want to waste no time, that's sure. I'll have to make good time to overhaul them."

There was another person who had been left behind like himself, but who was within half a mile of the party. As he approached he saw that this was William Denton, the cousin of the stolen child.

They had ridden five miles down the pass before he finally overtook his friends. There was no vestige visible to his eyes of the trail they seemed to be following, but the soil of the pass had been too much cut up by their horses for any single track to remain discernible.

"Where's the trail, Tom?" he asked, as he rode to the head of the party. "Is it plain?"

"No," growled Tom. "I'll be shot if it ain't pegged out. And it was as clean cut a trail as I ever followed."

"That's blasted queer. A hoss's hoof would make its photograph on this sile. Must have took to the hard ground on the hillside. How far did you make it out?"

"Mile and a half or two mile. I reckon."

"Durn'd odd. Shouldn't wonder if he'd double. Where's Picayune Pete?"

"S'pose he's coming down the pass after you. Didn't show himself afore we started."

"The dogs he didn't!" cried Bill, casting an anxious glance backward. "Hope the lad ain't come to no harm. There's a clear view two miles up, and no signs of him."

"Oh, he's all right. S'pose he's loping along after us."

"Shouldn't wonder if he'd found the trail, for I'll be fiddled if there's any here," said Bill. "There's a neck jist ahead of us. If he's gone down you'll find his mark there."

They rode to where the pass contracted, two steep hills constricting it to within less than a hundred feet of width.

A thin alkaline soil, destitute of herbage, covered this space. The two scouts sprung from their horses, bidding the others to keep back—and traced the whole width of the neck, not suffering a foot of the soil to escape their keen scrutiny.

"We're on the wrong scent, lads," cried Bill, at length. "No hoof has passed here inside a week, and maybe not inside a year. We've got to turn back on our tracks. I'll bet a pony Picayune Pete has found something."

The up-hill passage back was traced rather slowly by the horses, which had already been ridden fifteen miles at high speed.

They were nearly an hour in reaching the point at which the side passes branched off.

"Shoot me if I ain't getting worried about the boy," said Bill, as they reached this point without any trace of Pete being seen. "Anybody here know which pass he took?"

"I saw him strike into that narrow opening to the right," said one of the men, pointing to the rocky jaws of the contracted pass which Pete had taken.

"Yes, and you can shoot me for a blind monkey if Joe Prime ain't doubled on us!" cried Tom. "Here's his track, close to the rock, pointing up the valley. He's been hunting stony bottom, and stepped in that patch of sand."

The scout suddenly drew up his horse, forcing those behind him to stop with startling haste.

The next instant he sprung to the ground, leaving the animal standing in the center of the pass.

"If anything's happened to Pete," he muttered, "I'm his pard, and I'll hurt the feller that hurt him."

"What's up?" cried Tom Wilson, leaving his horse and walking briskly forward.

"Bloody work of some kind. I dunno just what it is. But I'll go a good horse that Pete's been hurt. There's some of his hair on that stone, just where the blood's thick."

"And, see here," said Tom, pointing to a small patch of sand. "It's the trail ag'in, or I'm a baby."

"Sure as thunder!" yelled Bill. "That's my hoss's private mark. Bricktop has ambushed here, and has shot Pete. If I don't prove sudden ruin to him for it, then go back on me."

"Where is Pete, then?" said Tom. "Blamed if that ain't some mystery in it."

"And where's Nicodemus? And where's the hoss?" asked Bill. "It's maybe not so bad, after all. Pete's ahead of us anyhow. He ain't behind us. I'm going to pelt on if it takes me to Frisco."

"And here's with you," cried Tom, tightening up the strap of his saddle as he spoke. "You gentlemen can go back to the train. Hand Bill and me what grub you've got. We mought want it."

"Will we wait for you at the ford?"

"No, no. I mought have to ride a hundred miles cross country. Take the train at double speed down the Humboldt, and make for Virginia City. There's some of you been over the route."

"I will go with you," said William Denton, leading his horse forward.

"Not if I know myself," replied Bill Grubb, curtly. "Don't want no greenhorns with us. None of your stripe anyhow."

There was something in the look that he fixed on the speaker that silenced the latter. He drew back with a flushed face, but made no answer.

"Hunt out Mr. Ellis in Virginia City," continued the scout. "Tell him of the stealing of his daughter. If we don't turn in very soon after you, tell him to send a party across toward Austin to look for us. I reckon the trail will lay down Reese river."

Ten minutes afterward the two experienced scouts were riding onward down the pass, while the others had turned back, and were slowly retracing their way toward the train.

The pass grew more difficult and rocky as they ad-

vanced. They reached its highest point about two miles forward, and began its slight descent toward the valley to the west.

"There's water ahead there, Tom," said Bill. "I've a notion we'll strike soft ground inside the next half-mile."

He was right. A small stream, rising from springs in the mountains, began to trickle down their route. It was bordered by a narrow track of soil, green with thin clumps of bunch grass.

The horses eagerly nipped the fodder as the two men sprung to the ground and commenced an earnest scrutiny of the banks of the stream.

"Here it is," said Tom. "And here! and here! He's gone this way sure enough. But, what track is this?"

"Pete's hoss," said Bill. "The boy is after Bricktop; or the hoss is, anyhow. Them tracks ain't long made. I've a notion that the trail's hot."

"To horse ag'in, then, and let's see what stuff there is left in these critters."

They had not gone far before they were startled by the sharp report of a rifle at no great distance in advance.

The scouts looked at each other significantly, then, as if by a common impulse, threw themselves from their horses, and ran noiselessly but rapidly down the pass.

A few steps brought them within sight of its mouth, at the same moment that a fierce medley of yells broke on the air.

The scene before them was a startling one. Backed up against the rock at the side of the pass stood Picayune Pete, a pistol in his hand, while his rifle lay at his feet.

Before him stood four yelling Indians, while a fifth lay prostrate on the ground.

They were armed with bows, and a stalwart savage had just fitted an arrow to the string, when Pete's pistol cracked, and the Indian tumbled heavily to the ground.

Simultaneously two rifle-shots sounded from up the pass, and two more of the savages fell.

Pete glanced in wonder toward the two men who were running rapidly toward him. A single glance enabled him to recognize the scouts.

He turned and took deliberate aim at the fleeing savage. Again his pistol cracked sharply, and the last of his fierce foes fell heavily to the earth.

"Shoshonees! Blame their red pictures!" said Tom, after glancing into the face of one of the savages. "They're some of your peaceful Injuns. I've had more than one scrimmage with them at Gravelly Ford. Call your dog off, Pete, the nigger's dead as a door nail."

Nicodemus was worrying one of the fallen savages but slunk away at the stern command of his master, with a look as if he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself.

"Blow me if the boy don't shoot straight and true!" said Bill, looking with admiration upon the fallen Indians, every one of whom was dead. "Have they hurt you, Pete? Your face is covered with blood."

"Them cusses didn't do it," said Pete, stooping to wash his face in the stream. "Got that back in the pass. Got my top-knot scratched by a rifle-ball."

"By whom? Joe Prime, weren't it?"

"Who said so?" asked Pete.

"We saw the trail just where you fell, and reckoned the balance."

"Reckoned too fast, then. The trail went ahead of me. I cotched this scratch from behind."

"The deuce you did! Who sent it?"

"Nobody knows that, 'cept it's Nicodemus. The dog had his eyes turned back, and mought have see'd it. Kind of depend on him to spot the feller yet."

"Bet I know who done it," said Bill, a sudden remembrance coming to him.

"Don't be knowing too much now," said Tom. "You knowed it was Joe Prime an hour ago. Now

you're going to know it was somebody else. Best not be guessing."

"The dorg knows. He's no fool of a dorg, Nicodemus ain't. Bet my pile he sorts out the chap."

"We are losing time here," said Tom. "Let's look up the trail."

"There it leads straight down-stream," said Pete. "I was follerin' it with my nose down, like a hound, when I was stirred up by an arrow from one of them dead Injuns."

"And where's your hoss?"

"You kin see him there, making his dinner off of bunch grass, three miles out."

Pete's horse was visible in this green border of the stream, busily cropping the succulent grass.

Bill Grubb brought the horse back to Pete at the end of a lariat.

After reloading their weapons and making a hasty meal of the provender they had brought with them, they mounted and continued their journey.

All that day they rode forward, without overtaking the fugitive.

Shortly after noon of the next day they rode into the busy mining town of Austin, a bustling settlement planted in the heart of the wilderness by the presiding genius of silver.

Riding through the rude frontier town they drew rein at the door of a shanty, dignified by the name of hotel, and sprung from their wearied horses.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"OH, PETE! PETE!"

AFTER partaking of the best dinner that the hotel of their choice afforded, and seeing that their horses were provided for, the three friends emerged into the streets of Austin on an exploring expedition.

It was a rudely-built town, of low frame houses, dropped down just where it had pleased the errant will of their owners.

At least half the town seemed to be made up of drinking saloons, and all the population to be formed of their customers, to judge by appearances.

"We'd best divide," said Bill. "I've a notion that he's somewhere in this town, yet."

"All right," said Tom. "I know a little about this place. I've been here afore, you see."

"Best come with me, Pete," said Bill.

"No. If two kin do well, three kin do better. I'll strike down this snaky old street," replied Pete.

The avenue which the boy followed seemed built on both sides of a gulch, which bottom formed the passageway.

"The Shades," "The Gem," and a host of other attractive titles, met his eye as he advanced, inviting the thirsty to partake of spiritual comfort.

The lad's optical organs were keenly used as he proceeded, scanning every face he met. Nor did he hesitate to enter the various drinking establishments, take a look through their array of customers, and inquire concerning the objects of his search.

Nicodemus followed him with a listless expression that showed that he was not greatly interested in the expedition.

Pete, however, succeeded in finding one blear-eyed loafer who had seen a man and a girl ride into the town, several hours before. Couldn't tell where they had gone. The man wasn't red-whiskered, but dead black, the informant thought. Girl looked kind of droopy and scared-like. That's all he knew about it.

Somewhat encouraged by the information Pete went on, still searching and questioning.

He reached a solitary saloon on the far edge of the town, without learning more.

This was a long, rambling, one-storyed structure, built of unplanned boards, displaying a sign-board with the title "The Miner's Delight."

Nicodemus seemed rather more interested on reaching this establishment, and smelt round its doorway as if he scented game within.

"Thinks he smells 'coon, that dorg does," Pete said to himself. "Ain't no animiles of that sort round these diggin's, old feller. If you could only strike Bricktop's scent, now, there'd be some use talkin'."

Opening the door Pete walked boldly into the saloon.

Its occupants consisted of half a dozen burly loafers who were hanging idly about the counter, and several others seated at tables round the room.

One party of four were busily playing poker, with a greasy pack of cards. A tall, black-whiskered man sat near them, overlooking their game.

They looked with a careless glance round at Pete, who returned their stare with interest.

They were all unknown to him, that was certain. Colonel Green, or Joe Prime, did not inhabit that locality.

The boy moved carelessly toward the group of loafers by the counter, intending to question them concerning the object of his search.

Nicodemus gave one smell at his master's feet, and then hastily scuttled around the room, with a movement as if he was at fault about a scent.

This lasted but an instant, when the faithful dog made a fierce attack upon him of the black whiskers, barking, springing at him, and making savage efforts to bite him.

The man sprung hastily to his feet, with a fierce curse.

"Curse the brute, what ails it?" he cried, attempting to kick the dog. But Nicodemus was too spry. He kept out of the reach of the heavy boots of his antagonist, though making the most strenuous efforts to insert his teeth in the man's legs.

"Blast his infernal picture!" cried the man, in a towering rage. "I'll settle his hash for him."

He drew and cocked a pistol as he spoke.

"That's my dorg!" said Pete. "I fight for that dorg. Maybe you'd like to settle my hash?"

"Yes," cried the man, savagely, turning his pistol on Pete, ere the latter could draw his own weapon.

There was no bravado in that town. Pistols were not drawn in sport. The life of a man was taken as lightly as that of a dog. It would have been a serious matter for Pete, only that Nicodemus came to his rescue.

The man meant murder, and drew the trigger of his pistol with cool aim. But at the same instant Nicodemus buried his teeth in the fellow's unprotected calf. His hand twisted upward with the pain, and the ball passed over Pete's head.

He kicked savagely back at the animal, and again aimed his weapon at Pete.

But the young spy was not going to be taken twice napping. His own pistol cracked sharply, and the man's weapon dropped to the floor, his right arm falling heavily to his side.

"What the blazes is up?" cried the bartender, displaying a similar weapon.

"This is what's up," yelled Pete, leaping at his antagonist and grasping his bushy black whiskers.

A quick pull, and beard and mustache came off together, revealing the clean-shaved face, and devilish look of Colonel Green!

"No use, kurnel; you're sold," cried Pete. "Don't you fellers be fightin' for this rascal and baby-stealer. You don't know him."

"If I don't know him you can sell me out cheap!" cried one of the card party, rising to his feet, pistol in hand.

Several other weapons were displayed by the party, and it seemed as if there was going to be a general affray.

The unmasked ruffian ripped out a desperate oath, and with a quick movement displayed a long knife in his left hand.

An agile leap placed him beside Pete, with the knife brandished above the boy's unprotected head.

"Back down there a bit, you lop-sided hound!" cried a voice from the door.

These words were accompanied by the sharp re-

port of a pistol, and the ruffian staggered and fell headlong.

"Two can play at that game," continued the voice, and its owner stalked into the room. "I'm Bill Grubb, the scout. I've pined an infernal thief and rascal. If he's got any friend as wants to take it up I'll take him at ten paces."

"Fight for that critter!" cried the man who had risen from the card party. "Not if I know myself. I know him like a book. He was hunted out of Washoe three years ago by a Vigilance Committee, for a bloody murder. He only saved his neck by taking to his heels. He's dead as a door-nail, now, though."

Pete had fallen back with a nervous revulsion in a chair. He was not yet hardened to such scenes and perils. The dog was affectionately licking his hand.

"You're a hoss, Nicodemus, you are," said Pete, with a return of his old humor. "And I owe you one, Bill Grub. Pay it back some time before we part. Where's the gal, that's the next question?"

"What gal?" asked the card-player.

"This dead cove stole a gal from our train at gravelly Ford. We've chased him ever since at top speed, and jist holed him here."

"It's a daughter of Mr. Ellis, of Virginia City," added the scout.

"What! John Ellis?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Don't I? He made his fortune in these diggin's. Stole Jack Ellis's daughter, eh? What for?"

"Donno," said Pete. "Wanted to bleed the daddy, I reckon. What did he do with the gal, that's the question?"

"In there," said the bartender, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

Pete's movement toward the inner portion of the house was hindered by the vision of a flying child, who came bursting through a door, and flinging her arms with a choking clasp round his neck.

"Oh, Pete! Pete!" cried the well-known voice of Minnie Ellis. "Oh! I'm so glad to see you! Take me out of this horrible, horrible place! Quick, Pete, before that dreadful man comes!"

Pete, fearful lest she should see the spectacle on the floor, lifted her in his arms, and bore her through the gathering crowd at the door.

"You'll never be troubled with him, ag'in. Minnie," he said. "Picayune Pete's about now. Don't lose sight of you ag'in, nohow."

"Oh, Pete!" she continued. "I'll never get over my fright. He made so much of me, and coaxed me out of the wagon to see the sun rise over the mountains, and then put me on horseback and ran away with me. Oh, how I prayed for you all the dreadful days!"

"You have me now," said Pete. "And he won't trouble you no more."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"There, Minnie, my gal, don't be askin' questions. And here's Nicodemus, too, you ain't seen."

The dog was frisking gladly about them. Minnie, whom Pete had now placed on the ground, stooped and patted him with childish gladness. She had no words to express her gratitude for his deliverance.

"Hurry up, Pete," said Bill Grubb, who had left the saloon and made his way through the gathering crowd. "Dead men don't kick, and it ain't counted no harm in Austin to shoot a thief. But there ain't no telling how people's notions may turn; and there's a queer crowd here; the feller mought have friends. Best hunt up Tom, and make tracks while we're on the safe side."

They had no difficulty in finding Tom, whom they met proceeding toward the center of the excitement. A few words revealed to him the startling success they had had.

In half an hour more they were mounted and leaving the town, Minnie on Pete's saddle, and Nicodemus running proudly in advance.

They camped out that night about ten miles from Austin.

CHAPTER XIX.

A GLAD SURPRISE.

THE ride over to Virginia City was long and rugged. They proceeded slowly, Minnie being too much exhausted by her previous journey to bear rapid traveling.

The child had evidently suffered greatly with terror, grief and weariness, and her whole nervous organization seemed to be unstrung. An involuntary trembling possessed her, and it seemed as if the color would never return to her pallid cheeks. Her companions were all very kind to her, wrapping her carefully in their blankets at night, to preserve her from the chill of the mountain air, and being assiduous in their attentions to her during the day.

Pete, particularly, could not do enough to make her comfortable, and she expressed her sense of his kindness by the grateful look in her large, blue eyes, and by the confiding way in which she clung to his waist during their long rides.

They were now crossing a wide, level, desolate plain, with nothing resembling vegetation save an occasional patch of the dreary sage bush, which is the main vegetable production of these barren regions.

It was nine o'clock in the morning. The sun, which was climbing up the eastern sky behind them, threw their shadows far out in advance toward the long range of hills which they could see rising in the far distance.

Mile after mile they rode on toward these hills which seemed to approach with infinite slowness. There was no water on this plain, the loose alkaline earth drinking up its liquid treasures with the most thirsty avidity. They felt anxious, therefore, to reach the hills, with the hope of finding water and provender for their horses.

It was approaching noon when they at length drew near the hills, which loomed into double height as they gazed upon their rocky flanks.

"There's water now, or something that shines like it," said Tom, pointing forward.

It was at a point yet several miles distant, near the base of the range. A faint glimmer met their eyes, whose nature could not yet be fully determined.

"If it is a run of water it must come from an opening in the hills," said Bill. "We'll likely find there the pass we want."

"What is that thing close in to the rock?" asked Pete. "I jist then saw it move."

"I saw it too," said Minnie. "It looked like the waving branch of a tree, or a bush."

The scout's eyes were fixed with scrutinizing glance on the point in question. He drew near to Tom and spoke to him in a low tone.

"Hold back a bit, Pete," said the scout. "Let us two ride ahead."

Pete did so without asking any questions.

They were now but an eighth of a mile distant from what proved to be in reality a stream of water, flowing from the jaws of a pass in the hills.

"Swear I don't see nothing," said Bill. "Not even a shadder."

He was answered by the sudden emergence of a dozen mounted Indians, who rode out from the pass at full speed and maneuvered their swift ponies with evident intention to surround the small group.

A faint scream broke from Minnie's lips as she clung with a convulsive clasp to Pete's waist.

"Don't get skeered, gal," he said, somewhat sternly. "A screechin' Injun ain't sartain death, nohow you can fix it."

"Quick! Into the rock! There's a hollow there will just hold us," said Bill, hastily. "Don't let the yellin' devils git round us."

They were between the savages and the base of the hills, and drew quickly into the natural fastness alluded to, backing their horses up against the rock and confronting their foes.

The savages rode in a half-circle round them, with blood-curdling yells. They seemed to be endeavor-

ing to frighten the whites. Their arms only consisted of bows and arrows, and the inevitable tomahawk.

"Git back now, and save your 'tarnal throats!'" cried Tom, angrily. "I'll fling an ounce of lead into some of your bread-baskets if you don't."

An arrow the next instant struck the rock above their heads, as if the savages were determining to bring them to their senses.

It was answered by the report of Bill Grubb's rifle, and one of the Indian horses fell dead to the ground, flinging its rider heavily.

"That's tit for tat," muttered the scout.

A flight of a dozen arrows followed, evidently aimed to hurt. Pete felt a sharp twinge of pain in his side. He had seated himself so as to cover Minnie.

He raised his weapon, and, with quick aim, fired back. The report was simultaneous with that from Tom Wilson's weapon.

Two of the savages reeled in their saddles. One fell to the ground.

The discharge was answered by a revengeful yell, and a second flight of arrows. The savages rode boldly in, as if with the impression that their foes were now defenseless.

They were taught better than this by the sharp reports of a brace of pistols. Another of them fell to the ground. Pete's pistol wounded one of the horses, which turned and ran off at full speed.

As if an echo of this a peal of rifle-shots followed, and two more saddles were emptied in the savage ranks.

The remainder of the Indian party rode off in dismay, at the same time that a group of horsemen rode out from the pass, several of them chasing the flying savages.

Our friends waited in wonder for the arrival of this reinforcement.

At the head of the approaching party was a stalwart, handsome man, of middle age. He rode up and scanned the sunburnt faces of the scouts.

"I am John Ellis, of Virginia City," he said, as he dismounted.

A faint scream from behind met his ears. Minnie leaped forward with the lightness of a fawn, and buried herself in his arms.

"Oh, papa, papa!" she cried. "Oh, my dear, good papa! I've come so many miles to you, and through such dreadful scenes. Isn't it good you came in time to save us? These are Mr. Wilson and Mr. Grubb, my kind friends. And this is Picayune Pete. And there is Nicodemus. Oh, I'm so happy!"

"And this is my little daughter?" he said, gazing fondly down on the nestling child. "Where is the villain who stole her?"

He looked around with a stern glance.

"Gone under," was Bill Grub's sententious reply.

"And you rescued her, my good friends," he said, with a grateful look. "I got word by a rider from your train, and came out here to meet you. Just in time, too, it seems."

CHAPTER XX.

A FATHER'S VENGEANCE.

AN hour later they were all seated within the jaws of the rock-bound path, eating their frugal dinner beside the welcome water, and freely conversing upon the events of the last few days.

The flesh-wounds of Pete and the scouts had been dressed, and the story of the abduction and rescue already concisely told.

Minnie sat by her father's side, his arm around her, nestling against him with an aspect of entire happiness, and glancing contentedly over at Pete, who sat opposite.

Nicodemus was nestled up against his master in much the same manner, enjoying the bits of his own dinner with which Pete regaled his faithful companion.

"There's one villain gone under," said Bill Grubb,

"There's another afloat yet. Colonel Green was the boldest, but he wasn't the worst of the two."

"I bet," said Pete, taking off his cap and showing the fresh wound in his scalp. "The feller that plowed up my top-knot that way ain't got his rations yet."

"Who was it?" asked Mr. Ellis, quickly.

"That is what we are not quite sure of, though we've got our notions," said Bill. "He made that shot from behind, you see. It was somebody belonging to the train, that's sure."

He proceeded to tell the circumstances attending Pete's being wounded.

"There was a fellow rode express over from the train?" he asked.

"Yes, and brought us the news of my dear child being stolen. There were two, in fact. My nephew came with him."

"Your nephew? Where is he?"

"Helping to chase the Indians out there. Why do you ask?"

"Wondered I didn't see him, that's all."

"We ain't quite blind about this other feller," said Pete, "only wouldn't like to say nothing without being sartain sure. Howsomever, there's one pair of eyes seen the 'coon that shot me."

"Who was that?" asked Mr. Ellis.

"It was the dog, papa," said Minnie. "It was Nicodemus, Pete's dog."

Mr. Ellis gazed with some interest on the dog from whom such feats of detection were expected.

"He looks like a wide-awake animal," he said.

The three men who had gone in chase of the flying Indians now returned. They had not succeeded in overtaking the savages, whose fleet mustangs had carried them beyond pursuit.

They sprung from their horses and joined the party, with a rapid account of their enterprise.

"Glad to see you again, Mr. Grubb," said one of them. "And Mr. Wilson, too. Hardly expected to meet you so soon. And here's my dear Minnie," added her cousin, for it was he. "Alive and well, as I feared never to see her again."

"Hoped, maybe," said a stern voice behind him. "Here's Picayune Pete, at your service. And here's Nicodemus."

Denton turned, with a paling face to confront Pete, who was holding the growling and struggling dog.

"That dorg scents game," said Pete, releasing the animal.

With a low, savage bark, the dog sprung forward, leaping with one fierce bound from the ground. In an instant he had Denton by the collar, struggling to insert his teeth in his throat.

A violent curse broke from the man's lips as he seized the maddened animal and tore him from his hold. He flung him fiercely to the ground, but the dog was in an instant on his feet again, and renewing the attack.

"Give me your rifle, quick, till I shoot the mad brute!" he cried, trying to drag the weapon from the hands of the nearest person.

"He's got a right to be mad," said Pete, confronting him. "I've fought many a time for that dorg, and now that dorg's fighting for me. Down with you, Nick. You've twigged the right game. Leave it to your master to settle with him."

"What does all this mean?" asked Mr. Ellis, coming forward.

"It means that this chap's at the bottom of all the plans ag'in' Minnie," said Pete, sternly, confronting the culprit. "What had Kurnel Green to make by stealing her, only that he was *bought* to do it? This chap, though, heard that Mr. Ellis was rich, and thought that if Minnie was out of the way he'd be the next heir."

Mr. Ellis looked at his nephew, without asking any question.

"It's all an infernal lie," came through the pallid lips of the latter.

"Is it a lie?" cried Pete. "I'll show everybody here how much of a lie it is!"

He proceeded with a rapid intonation to describe his reasons for distrusting William Denton, beginning with what he had overheard in the streets of Toledo, rehearsing the conversation he had listened to while under the wagon on the plains, and ending with the attempt to murder him, and the shrewdness of the dog in detecting the villain.

"It's true as shooting!" roared Bill Grubb. "Didn't I ride last down the pass to join Tom Wilson's party, and wasn't this chap jist ahead of me, coming back from his attempt to commit murder?"

"As you were last, maybe you did it," said Denton.

"Me did it? I'll prove who done it, at twenty paces, with rifles!" cried the scout.

"All of you stand back," said Mr. Ellis, confronting his nephew. "Every word the boys say is true," he continued. "I see it in your face, and I would believe a dog's instinct sooner than your living tongue. You dare not deny a word of it!"

The culprit stood as if overcome with fear, his lips trembling, his eyes fixed on the ground. He attempted to make an answer.

"See here, gentlemen," said the father, appealing to all present. "Here is my child, the apple of my eye, whom I trust to this fellow to bring me from the States. The bloody villain attempts to make way with the innocent child, and would have done it only his confederate wanted to keep her alive for plans of his own. Such treachery is tenfold worse than murder. What is the just fate of such a man?"

"Death!" came from the implacable lips of the stern jury.

"No, no, father!" cried Minnie, in accents of terror. "Don't—don't shoot him. Oh, papa! I could never love you if you did!" She clung earnestly to her father's hand.

"He deserves it, Minnie. But for your sake, and because there is some of my family blood in his veins, he shall go free. But it will be dangerous for him if he ever lets me set eyes on him again. Away with you, William Denton, while you have this child, whom you have so wronged, to plead for you. I will not answer for myself an hour from now."

The miserable culprit, with downcast eyes, slowly mounted his horse, and rode with depressed looks up the pass, never once venturing to look back. A curve in the rocky avenue soon shut him out from their accusing eyes.

"And so he goes out of my life forever," said Mr. Ellis. "If he had harmed you, Minnie, nothing should have saved him!"

CHAPTER XXI. DROPPING INTO SUNSHINE.

PICAYUNE PETE had gained a warm and powerful friend in Mr. Ellis, who felt deeply grateful to him for saving his daughter from the plots against her.

Mr. Ellis was a prosperous merchant in Virginia City, and they were not back a week in this frontier

town ere he had Pete fully installed in his establishment, and taken into his house as a member of his own family.

In the store Pete developed another side of his character. He was so energetic, and made himself so agreeable to customers, that Mr. Ellis began to think that the advantage of the bargain was on his side instead of on Pete's. It was evident that the presence of the boy made things run more smoothly and rapidly. All Pete's old cynicism seemed to have died out under the new influences which now beamed upon his life.

It must not be imagined, though, that he threw off his boyish wildness at once and entirely. There would come upon him, at times, that fierce impatience of restraint which the caged tiger feels. In such cases he would disappear, with scant courtesy, from Virginia City, and would occasionally be absent for weeks.

In these cases Bill Grubb was his invariable companion. The scout had taken so great a fancy to the boy that he, too, had taken his abode in this Western town, though making it only a center for his numerous expeditions.

We will here pass over this period of his life, and tell how, as he grew older, he grew handsomer, and in every way more engaging—his face, under the influence of education and higher social conditions, losing its look of wild cynicism, and becoming frank, manly, and attractive.

The somewhat stunted boy developed, eventually, into a full-sized, well-formed man, to whom his old appellation would no longer apply.

Each advancing year also brought new beauty into Minnie's charming face, until she became the reigning belle of all that portion of the Pacific slope, and of San Francisco, to which Mr. Ellis afterward removed.

But no advantageous offer could swerve her soul from its old allegiance to Pete, nor had her father aught but good wishes for the growing love between his *protegee* and his dearly-loved daughter.

But Pete had become a prosperous merchant on his own account, and a highly respected citizen, when he finally won the charming girl whose influence had changed him from a young savage into a polished gentleman.

They now dwell in one of the most notable mansions of the Golden City, and nowhere within the States does more happiness dwell within four walls.

Bill Grubb and Tom Wilson have always a warm corner and a welcome in the house of their young friend; and last, but not least, Nicodemus reigns lord of the hearth-rug, and of the hearts of his master and mistress.

"He is old," said Pete, "and inclines to be crusty, but his heart is in the right place; and it would ill become me, in these prosperous days, to turn my back on the old companion who was so faithful to Picayune Pete."

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